

“Death is a black camel”: Metaphors, similes, and proverbiality in the stereotyped re-presentation of fictional ethnicity

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The paper explores the use of figurative language by Charlie Chan, a fictional Chinese detective protagonist of a series of novels and film adaptations between the 1920s and the 1940s. Chan's construction as an ethnotype is strongly determined by language choices, including the recurring use of metaphors, similes, and proverbiality. In particular, the research focuses on the classification and analysis of Chan's figurative speech patterns in the novel *The Black Camel* (1929), and features both a quantitative survey and qualitative comments on relevant examples. The results show numerous occurrences of figurative language, in a tension between conventional and creative uses, where especially the latter corresponds to a constant effort by the author to create a sense of 'exotic' otherness. This confirms that Charlie Chan is mainly constructed with a white orientalist audience in mind, in an attempt to cater for a stereotypical imagery that only occasionally overlaps with faithful ethnic and cultural representation.

Keywords: Charlie Chan; Fictional Language; Figurative Language; Metaphors; Zen Cop Stereotype

1. Introduction

This article stems from a reflection on the exploitation of figurative language—and metaphors in particular—in the fictional representation of a minority character of Chinese origin. It is widely recognised that representation plays a key role in shaping reality, especially when the image of a minority is built by a more powerful majority that can force their own perception onto the represented. When an image becomes popular, it reinforces itself, and continuously repropounding it becomes an effective way to cater for audience expectations (Ramos Pinto, 2009). Here, this phenomenon is explored linguistically taking as an example Charlie Chan, the protagonist of a series of novels by Earl Derr Biggers. Very popular at the beginning of the last century, he gradually became an icon of mediated Asian American stereotyping. More

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specifically, for this analysis of figurative language, the selected case study is the novel *The Black Camel* (1929), whose title is itself a metaphor. As all Charlie Chan books, it is a classic detective story: a famous actress is found dead while on holiday in Hawaii, and many of her friends, acquaintances, and colleagues are suspected. After being puzzled for a while, Chan manages to solve the case.

This article is structured as follows: the theoretical background includes an overview on rhetorical figure classification, an introduction to the role of metaphors in mediated stereotyping, and a sketch of the character taken as a case study. Next, the method section explains corpus sampling and annotation. Results are first presented quantitatively, and then selected examples are explored to offer a complete view on the character's figurative language. The conclusions include both considerations on the character and more general observations on the analysis of figurative language in fiction.

2. Background

2.1. A few words on figurative language

To study the special figurative elements of Chan's language and their function in the construction of his fictional identity, it was necessary to combine a quantitative and a qualitative approach, both requiring a principled system of identification and classification of the features selected for the analysis. It is obviously impossible to discuss here the different aspects of figurative language, or the very concept of rhetorical figure. The issue dates back to ancient rhetoric and poetics, develops across centuries and disciplines ranging from stylistics to literature, from argumentation to semiotics (to name just a few), and evidently lies outside the scope of this paper. It is however worth noting that the so-called cognitive turn has imposed a new interpretation of figures, which involves mental processes and is not limited to considering them a mere question of style. In this perspective, metaphor has been a privileged object of investigation, with a strong focus on both its pervasive use in everyday language and its crucial cognitive function. This approach has led to the identification of metaphorical concepts shared across languages and cultural communities and seems to make possible an easier and more effective interpretation of fundamental experiences in human life—e.g., time (represented in terms of space relations), or mental states (translated into spatial orientation or movement), or life (as a journey), and so on. As a consequence of this widespread interest for conceptual metaphors, living metaphors (Ricoeur, 1985) have been basically neglected in linguistic research, also for their traditional interpretation as mere stylistic devices, aimed exclusively at the embellishment of texts. Yet, when considering metaphors, their use, and their communicative function, the traditional view turns out to be actually fallacious, as living metaphors (i.e., creative acts of

individual speakers) are powerful means to activate complex processes of interpretation, whose communicative potential can be intentionally exploited to different ends.

In this respect, the argumentative role of figures is emphasised in the 'New Rhetoric', where they are given an important place in the process of persuasion (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958). The potential of metaphor, in particular, is recognised in the context of the argumentative theory of analogy, where 'metaphorical fusion' appears to be functional to enhancing the standing of an analogy as a datum and not as a mere suggestion (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958). Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004), on the other hand, stems from the assumption that metaphor can "activate unconscious emotional associations" and thus influence "the value that we place on ideas and beliefs on a scale of goodness and badness" (Charteris-Black, 2005, p. 13). In CMA, metaphor functions as a bridge connecting ideological constructions (the set of beliefs selected by a social group to legitimise its own existence) with mythical representations of reality—or "political myth" (Flood, 1996, p. 44). Against this background, reasoned arguments (logos) are linked to emotions (pathos) under a new moral perspective (ethos), which is essential to legitimise political leaders and their discourse. In this perspective, as argued in this paper, metaphor can play a pivotal role in the construction of identities—both in fictional and public contexts.

Among theories and taxonomies developed across literary and cognitive approaches, Prandi's mapping of metaphors and adjacent figurative expressions seemed the most adequate for the purposes of this research, as it combines a conceptual perspective with attention to the linguistic form of the utterance (Prandi, 2004, 2017, 2021). In Prandi's classification, for example, *similes* are identified by their linguistic form: the presence of linguistic indicators (e.g., *like, as*) is a clue of the type of relation existing between the two elements involved in the relation of similarity. Namely, there is no claim of identification; on the contrary, the fact that a property shared by two concepts is brought to the fore implies that there is an inherent distinction between them. This in turn neither generates a conflict, nor challenges our standard way of conceiving the world. Metaphoric meaning, on the other hand, stems from a conflict.

Starting from a revised version of Aristotle's theory of metaphor, Prandi adopts a *minimal* definition of metaphor as the transfer of a concept into an alien conceptual domain, which triggers a potential conflict. Shared metaphors do not work regressively (as catachreses do, attaining consistency by dropping all features of the source concept that are not compatible with the target, as in, e.g., *the wings of a building*); rather, they are consistent because the underlying pattern is integrated in our way of thinking. Moreover, a shared metaphorical

concept differs from the creation of a metaphor by a single individual, which “attains consistency in a progressive and projective way” (Prandi, 2004, p. 392). This distinction is fundamental to single out the creative power of a metaphor and to understand that consistency is not an absolute concept, but there are different possibilities to manage the conflict that (potentially) lies behind any metaphorical creation. Each individual metaphor can be compared to a probe “launched beyond the borders of consistent thought, to explore a conceptual territory” (Prandi, 2004, p. 396), and in its voyage it can evolve in different directions, in a sort of virtually endless life cycle.

As a consequence, shared metaphorical concepts generate metaphorical swarms (Prandi, 2012) and polysemic words (e.g., *draw* in *to draw money*, *grasp* in *to grasp the meaning*, etc.) which become part of the lexicon. Furthermore, in a language there are polyrhematic expressions that acquire a special meaning, different from the ‘compositional meaning’ of the sequence, i.e., idioms (e.g., *kick the bucket*, *beat about the bush*, etc.). Idioms have a fixed structure, and do not allow variation or modification (as, for example, superlative forms of adjectives, diminutives, focalization, etc.). Idioms have a metaphorical component, which however is not perceived (and is often unrecognisable) by the average speaker, and their frozen meaning can be independent of their origin. Idioms are halfway between polysemic words and proverbs. The latter consists of whole sentences, used in isolation, whose conventional meaning is not necessarily metaphoric (cf. Prandi, 2021).

Despite the differences illustrated above, it is worth emphasising the difficulties arising when these figurative expressions have to be spotted in a text. Though isolated (and prototypical) examples seem to leave no room for doubt, the actual occurrences may be puzzling, and in some cases it may be challenging to draw a line. This preliminary warning is absolutely necessary for this research, as the corpus selected for the analysis includes the speech of a character constructed as a foreign speaker of English, with a marked foreign (Chinese) identity. Therefore, idioms can be verbally manipulated, proverbs contaminated with exotic components, while the divide between conventional and living metaphors is occasionally crossed: the former often acquire a new wording, the latter stem from the original re-elaboration of shared concepts. In the actual work of classification, the context of occurrence of the individual forms was given special relevance, with particular attention for the character’s peculiar features and their role in the communicative situations both within the novel and in the cultural system it belongs to.

2.2. Metaphors in a fictional minority representation

Figurative language, and especially metaphors, are essential in fiction, as “the best fictions, like the best metaphors, manage to hold such powerful resonance

because the worlds they give rise to matter to their readers” (Seitz, 1999, p. 120). While this may suggest a sense of identification of the audience with the metaphors, this is not necessarily the case, as even though they can be powerful means to favour understanding, they are born from conflict, as they (forcibly) bring together opposing elements.

Furthermore, when a fictional product represents a minority, metaphors can become an integral part of the representation on various levels. First, metaphors can be used diegetically and descriptively to talk about differences, to raise marvel, fear, or even amusement, or to make them more understandable to the reader. A famous example may be Raban’s metaphoric description of the Arabic language: “To live in Arabic is to live in a labyrinth of false turns and double meanings. No sentence means quite what it says. Every word is potentially a talisman, conjuring the ghosts of the entire family of words from which it comes” (Raban, 1980, p. 19).

There is, however, another way to use metaphors, i.e., by attributing their use to a fictional character, in which case they may become a lexical and phraseological element of linguistic variation. Cultural differences in conceiving and using metaphors, or assumed cultural differences, may be used to create an estrangement effect or, in an opposite but complementary sense, to cater to audience expectations (Ramos Pinto, 2009). Indeed, as instances of linguistic variation, metaphors can be part of what makes a character recognisable by the audience, who will expect a character from a minority not only to have an accent, but also to use language in a different way, regardless of the accuracy of such representation.

Before moving on, it is worth taking a step back to note that the use of language here analysed and commented does not in any way correspond to actual uses of language, but to an exogenous representation generated by a group that use their power to impose and reproduce their own vision of reality. This means that this paper is not concerned with identity (for discussions on AAPI identity, see Feng, 2002; Lê Espiritu, 1992; Lowe, 1991), but with representation—i.e., image. While the two may influence each other, and even occasionally overlap, they originate from very different places and, although they apparently refer to the same entity, they substantially diverge. In fact, identity is a fluid and ineffable expression coming from within an individual and/or a group, while image is a paralysing imprinting that comes from outside an individual and/or a group and is meant to be used as a commodity for public discourse, be it aimed at official policing or ‘mere’ entertainment (Beller & Leerssen, 2007). An image can be fabricated to represent any type of minority, according to criteria that move from gender to ethnicity, from health status to age, from nationality to sexual orientation, from language to social status. For the sake of this study,

however, the construction of image around concepts of nationality, ethnicity, and language will be the main focus.

Imagology has long discussed the issue of external representation, starting from literary studies and subsequently making its way into more strictly linguistic disciplines, always with a strongly interdisciplinary vocation. In particular, an effective summarisation of image features was offered by van Doorslaer et al. (2016). First, it is important to clarify that images do not focus on authenticity, as authors aim to create fictional ethnotypes—i.e., “rationalizations of cultural difference” (van Doorslaer et al., 2016, p. 3). Such a commodification always has an ideological constructedness that takes shape within the text (textual level) but also interacts with the outside world (contextual level) and with other cultural products (intertextual level). Such fictional characters are not seen from the inside, but understood by their external expression and action, as they are based on “the (neo-)Aristotelian nature of the idea of ‘character’ as an instance of [. . .] ‘motivation:’ i.e., the narrative predication of behaviour and acts to actorial figures, linking ‘what people do’ to ‘how people are’” (van Doorslaer et al., 2016, p. 3).

Furthermore, while ethnotypes are innately ideological, they are not evoked and perceived consciously, as they are seen more simply as something obvious, which makes them even stronger. They remain unquestioned, and their recurrence contributes to blur the line with reality, as especially minorities will appear more often as stereotyped commodities in fiction than as active participants in political discourse. This lack of questioning is the main obstacle from realising that they are only true in discourse and very hard to apply successfully to reality. Indeed, as soon as an ethnotype encounters reality, it has to be quickly reshaped to still seem applicable, just like a weak argument contrasted with evidence, and that is why apparently contradictory ethnotypes coexist simultaneously (van Doorslaer et al., 2016).

2.3. Introducing the case study: Charlie Chan, the Zen cop

The character at the centre of our analysis, Charlie Chan, is a famous example of an image forged by the politically dominant group to represent a minority. A fictional Chinese Hawaiian detective created by Biggers and inspired by real-life legendary detective Chang Apana, Chan became extremely popular between the 1920s and the 1940s, and was at the centre of detective stories and cinematic adaptations (Huang, 2010, pos. 1965-1973). This fame was reached in a time when it was impossible for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) to represent themselves in the media (Ono & Pham, 2009). Chan is one of the earliest examples of the model minority stereotype, deemed to be one of the most pervasive and socially influential image of AAPIs: they have long been seen as clever and hard-working, but also too career-oriented

(Chang, 2003; Ono & Pham, 2009). At the same time, their alleged strong sense of duty and obedience was seen as a reasonable excuse to exploit their labour and weaponise them against civil rights protesters (Chang, 2003; Greene, 2014; Mok, 1998). While Chan's representativeness of the model minority has been discussed extensively, another aspect worth analysing is his very specific use of figurative language that, as will be seen, makes him one of the forefathers of what Ma defined as the 'Zen cop' stereotype (2014). There is no reference to the actual meaning of the word 'Zen,' as it is intended as a "radical break, like a leap of faith beyond metonymy into *metaphor and symbols*," as "the switch from the more literal frame of reference to the more *figurative* one suggests a cognitive elevation" (Ma, 2014, pos. 1086-1089, emphasis added). In fact, while "all good detectives are perhaps prone to such stroke of genius," for the stereotyped Zen cop these genius-like abilities come from outside of them, as they are "'blessed' with the mystique from the East" (Ma, 2014, pos. 1091-1094). This makes them endless replicas of an Orientalist concept of wisdom that is not the result of personality traits or experience, but an obvious feature of being Asian. Chan's early appearance, immense popularity, and influence on the subsequent representations of AAPIs make him a crucial starting point to discuss the ways the Zen cop is construed linguistically through the use of metaphors.

Before moving on to the linguistic analysis of Chan's utterances, it might be worth providing a sample of how the author describes the protagonist in the novel taken as a case study. Physically, Chan is portrayed as unattractive, with abundant remarks—that today would be promptly criticised for body shaming—on his round, slow and heavy figure: "Panting from the effort, Charlie boosted his heavy bulk on to the stage" (Biggers, 2017[1929], p. 807). His face, also plainly described as "fat" (Biggers, 2017[1929], p. 910) in terms of shape, seems to oscillate between opposite expressions. Apparently calm and inexpressive (example 4), even sleepy, it suddenly lights up when he catches a key detail or has an intuition related to the case at hand (examples 2 and 3), to the point they sometimes acquire non-human features (example 3). The numbered examples are always drawn from *The Black Camel* (Biggers, 2017[1929]), with the page reported right after the quoted part of the novel.

- (1) His little black eyes snapped with admiration; (701)
- (2) Charlie's small eyes were fixed upon the other's face with a fierce intensity; (724)
- (3) Charlie's eyes gleamed in the dark; (726)
- (4) His expression was calm and unruffled. (731)

The narrator also describes Chan's mentality and, as typical of a Zen cop, the aspects of his personality that make him wise and reflective are not really personality traits, but derivations of his 'Asianness.' Two examples may be relevant here. The first (example 5) explores Chan's state of mind when an important piece of evidence is stolen from him in front of witnesses (who are also suspects): the fury deriving from the ultimate (stereotyped) form of shame, losing face in front of everyone (a reference to Chinese conceptualisations of face, see Yuan 2012), has to be overcome by resorting to the wisdom he was passed on during his education:

- (5) Charlie Chan had lost face in the presence of seven witnesses. Though he had lived many years in Hawaii, he was still Oriental enough to feel a hot bitter anger that startled even himself. He sought to conquer that feeling immediately. Anger, he had been taught, is a poison that destroys the mind, and he would have need of all his faculties in the ordeal that impended. (731)

Similarly, his ability to remain calm and clear-headed under pressure is not a virtue of his character, but an innate feature of those coming from an Asian country:

- (6) Other people had time to enjoy life, Charlie reflected, but not he. The further discoveries of the afternoon baffled him completely, and he had need of all his oriental calm to keep him firmly on the pathway of his investigation. (866)

These are certainly presented as virtues, and in fact they inevitably lead Chan to the solving of his cases, however complicated and impossible to decipher, but they are not his, but "inherent in a race" (Ma, 2014, pos. 1157).

3. Method

As mentioned above, Michele Prandi's recent mapping (2021) was selected as a starting point for this study, given its thorough organisation and positioning of metaphor within a broader landscape of rhetorical figures that may have commonalities or even overlap with metaphors. This seemed particularly relevant for the study at hand, as Chan's speech pattern appears, even at a first qualitative reading, rich in metaphors but also in other figures that are sometimes intertwined.

Chan's own utterances were sampled out for analysis, and annotated manually to identify all figures of speech according to the criteria proposed by Prandi (2021). It is worth noting that Chan utters 18,644 words out of the 78,837 that

compose the whole novel. Chan's words are roughly dividable in 894 lines of variable length (the average length was circa 60 words), where line is intended as the utterance, however long or short, that Chan would give before being interrupted by another element, e.g., a turn change or a diegetic interpolation. Thus, with his utterances Chan takes up a considerable amount of the novel (nearly a quarter), as could be expected in a story where the protagonist solves cases by talking to witnesses and suspects, and is expected to explain his reasoning to both the other characters and the audience.

Repetitions of the same figure of speech were left out of quantitative counting (carried out using *Microsoft Excel*), and the instances of figurative language were annotated by attributing them to a specific figure. The most recurrent, which will be analysed, are:

- proverbs, including those that had some (authentic or stereotyped) reference to Chinese language and culture and those that did not;
- idioms, including those repeated verbatim and the ones that were adapted;
- similes;
- metaphors, further divided into living and conventional. Among the conventional ones, recurrent patterns were also identified.

After quantitative classification and counting, figures were taken one by one to understand whether, to what extent, and in what ways they contributed to the linguistic construction of Charlie Chan as a Zen cop. It is important to note that, despite the extensive explanations and the examples provided by Prandi, it was not always easy to attribute an instance of figurative language to just one of the abovementioned categories (e.g., creative rewording of conventional figures, creative content in a conventional structure). When an instance combined different figures of speech, they were counted once for every trace of figure identified. Since some of the figurative speech instances seemed particularly dense of meaning and implications, they were selected for more detailed description.

4. Results and discussion

As for the quantitative results, it is worth repeating that they are here presented with some reservations, as not all figures were easily classified. The numbers here presented are to be taken cautiously, and serve to provide an overview that will be better explained through examples. In total, 324 figures of speech were found (not counting repetitions). The most recurrent was undoubtedly metaphor, with a staggering 68.5%. More specifically, conventional metaphors were slightly more recurrent than living ones, with 36.7% and 31.8% of the total respectively. The other figures were less

meaningful statistically, but they stood out for their contribution to image construction: proverbs were used significantly (11.1%), followed by similes (7.4%) and idioms (5.9%). Another 7.1% included less recurring figures—e.g., metonymy, hyperbole, irony.

4.1. Proverbs

Among the proverbs found in the sample (11.1% of the total), some were to some extent linked to Chinese tradition. For instance, the following two utterances are quoted from one of the most important texts of Daoism, 道德經 (Dàodéjīng, *The Canonical Text on the Way and Virtue*):

(7) A thousand-mile journey begins with one step; (724)

(8) Those who know, don't talk; those who talk, don't know. (825)

Example (7) is the translation of a particularly famous quote from chapter 64 of the Daoist classic, 千里之行，始於足下 (qiānlǐ zhī xíng, shǐyú zú xià). Here the translation is quite literal, with the exception of the domestication of the traditional Chinese unit of distance 里(lǐ). Daoism is “a religio-philosophical tradition that has shaped Chinese life for more than 2,000 years” (Seidel et al. 2022, n.p.), and this classic volume has animated debate among sinologists and translators alike, for the impossibility to fully explain a text that is by its own nature obscure, dense, and laconic (Duyvendak, 1973[1953]). Nonetheless, nowadays, this saying has long been taken out of context and used as a generic inspirational quote. Its use by Biggers is an early instance of this banalisation: Charlie Chan reminds himself of these words to find motivation as he reluctantly leaves a dinner party to investigate the murder.

The second 道德經 (Dàodéjīng) quotation in example (8) comes from chapter 56: 知者不言，言者不知 (Zhì zhě bù yán, yán zhě bùzhī). Here, the reference is to the unspeakability of the Way (道 Dào), as the complete translation may better show: “He who knows (the Dao) does not (care to) speak (about it); he who is (ever ready to) speak about it does not know it” (translation by James Legge for Chinese Text Project). It is then seen as a positive thing not to speak about the Way (道 Dào), a virtue of “the noblest man under heaven” (Legge, n.d.). These words assume a completely different meaning when uttered by Charlie Chan, as he uses them to complain about the lack of collaboration of witnesses of the murder case.

Chan moves across different traditions from China, as he also quotes Confucianism and popular sayings, more or less literally:

(9) A gem is not polished without rubbing nor a man perfected without trials; (910)

(10) When a tree falls the shade is gone. (755)

The first example (9) is a free adaptation of a Confucian classic, the 三字經 (Sānzìjīng, *Three Character Classic*): 玉不琢 不成器 人不学 不知义 (yù bù zuó bùchéngqì rén bù xué bùzhī yì), translatable as: “If jade is not polished, it cannot become a thing of use. If a man does not learn, he cannot know his duty towards his neighbour [=righteousness]” (translation by Herbert Giles for Chinese Text Project). The extract from the Confucian classic is simplified and reshaped to fit in with the context. In fact, after solving the mystery, Charlie Chan feels particularly weary, as he had to face “a very trying case” (910) that initially seemed impossible. However, he patiently accepts the hardships because they are part of that perfecting process recalling that of jade polishing.

When talking to one of the main suspects, he compares an alibi to a tree, projecting his shade onto the person. In doing so (example 10), he translates the 成语 (chéngyǔ): 树倒无阴 (shù dǎo wú yīn). A 成语 (chéngyǔ) is a four-letter saying that usually originates from literature, myths and legends, and is made up of four characters, following classic Chinese syntax (Basciano 2015). Albeit born in more formal contexts, they are ubiquitous in contemporary language and used for various purposes.

Other proverbs found in the corpus exist in English, but the most fascinating fact about their use is that Chan rarely quotes them verbatim, as he changes their syntactic structure and/or makes them more ‘exotic’ through lexical choices:

(11) Famous god Jove, I hear, nodded on occasion; (730)

(12) The man who is about to cross a stream should not revile the crocodile’s mother; (758)

(13) Can a man think beneath a tree filled with myna birds? (804)

Example (11) is an instance of creative use of fixed expressions, a rather uncommon trait of non-native English speakers (extensive research on the subject has been carried out by ELF scholars—e.g., Allami et al., 2022; Franceschi, 2013), so it should not seem surprising to find it in Chan, designed as a non-proficient speaker (Renna & Santulli, 2021). In this case, adding that he heard about it contributes to creating some distance between him and the proverb.

In examples (12) and (13), the creative rewording seems directed towards making Chan's speech pattern more foreign and 'exotic.' The proverb in example (12) is a complete re-elaboration of the common saying "let sleeping dogs lie," where the image of the dog is replaced by that of a crocodile. As for example (13), Chan does not seem to recall a specific saying, but the syntactic construction is a typically proverbial rhetorical yes/no question (Mac Coinnigh, 2015). The 'exotic' flare is here added by the choice of the bird, as the mynas are Asian birds famous for being able to talk, a bit like parrots (Butterfield, 1998).

4.2. Idioms

These polyrhematic expressions, different from proverbs as they are shorter and always metaphorical (Prandi, 2021), are used by Chan less extensively (5.9%), but in variable ways:

(14) I am still at sea; (753)

(15) Do I put two and two together? Do I add up simple sum and get result? (905)

(16) You have drawn blanks. (844)

Example (14) represents an instance of typical use of the idiom "to be at sea": Chan is asked about his progress in the investigation and uses an idiomatic expression to picture his current state more vividly. In example (15), the common idiom "to put two and two together" is expanded through rephrasing, probably to give emphasis, as Chan is here strongly upset with himself for not realising something sooner. The idiom of example (16) is usually said as "to draw a blank" (fail at something): here the change is slight and mainly grammatical, most likely aimed at showing Chan's lack of linguistic competence. In other cases, idioms are combined with other figures of speech, creating rather unique results:

(17) [Reputation] dogging like a shadow at your heels (combination with simile). (700)

This example, where Chan is praising his opponent Tarneverro's reputation, joins an idiom and a (rather conventional) simile. The idiom is "to dog someone's heels," which recalls the behaviour of sheep-herder dogs, nipping at the heels of sheep to give them direction. In this case, the reputation is behind him and directs his steps. Conversely, in the conventional simile "like a shadow," reputation is imagined in the act of following the character it is

attributed to. The result is an ambiguous image with reputation actively spurring and at the same time passively attached to Tarneverro, which may certainly be another expression of Chan's limited language skills, but seems particularly fortunate, as in the novel Tarneverro often acts upon his fame as a psychic, using his alleged abilities to show his value as Chan's assistant.

4.3. Similes

Due to their linguistic structure, similes were easier to spot and left less room for doubt in their identification. Though less relevant than metaphors in Chan's speech patterns (7.4%), they show interesting forms of variation, which will be briefly discussed through the analysis of a few examples. Similes are sometimes used in a rather conventional manner:

(18) As clear as glass, (700)

(19) Solid as stone wall. (890)

In (19), the only significant variation from the standard use is Chan's stereotypical syntax, where adverbs and articles tend to be eliminated. This characteristic of Chan's language use is evident also in the following example, where the usual simile is expanded with an adjective, thus generating an emphasised but ungrammatical expression:

(20) dark as rainy night. (790)

This type of modification of conventional idioms is by no means an isolated exception. Quite often Chan exploits comparison in an even more creative way, to convey his message more effectively. He feels:

(21) like a fly on a hot griddle, and just as eager to get off. (842)

When describing the attitude of two eye witnesses, he affirms:

(22) honesty gleams like unceasing beacon from their eyes. (842)

In (22) the simile is introduced by a verb (*gleam*) consistent with the term of comparison (*beacon*) but not with the concept Chan intends to represent (*honesty*): a metaphorical component can therefore be recognised in this creative comparison. Creativity is also displayed when a simile is expanded, sometimes to the point that it sounds unnatural and excessive, as in the following example:

(23) As happy as it is this bright morning on undescribably [*sic*] lovely beach.
(815)

The overabundant use of qualifiers seems to reflect the ceremonial attitude of the character, in line with the Chinese stereotype described above. Actually, explicit reference to the Chinese culture occasionally occurs:

(24) buried as though beneath Great Wall of China, (876)

Example 24 contains a simplification that makes it ungrammatical.

4.4. Conventional metaphors

Conventional metaphors are the most frequently used figurative expressions and account for more than one third of the total (36.7%). They stem from shared metaphorical concepts, frequently referred to cognitive activities interpreted in physical terms, as in the following:

(25) It struck my mind; (753)

(26) I do not quite grasp your meaning; (753)

(27) it slipped my mind. (821)

As with similes, conventionality can be exploited more creatively. In (28) the metaphor LIGHT IS COMPREHENSION is the origin of a more complex representation of Chan's state of mind:

(28) When light at last begins to stream in, I do not close the shutters. Light is streaming in now. (904)

Light in the representation of the case is what makes the solution possible, as it metaphorically refers to understanding. In (29) it combines with the metaphorical representation of the case as a journey, which is repeatedly exploited by Chan, as in the following examples:

(29) I think I see faint glimmer of light ahead; (825)

(30) My investigation went no further; (776)

(31) We must take long way round [to solve the case]; (729)

(32) You are close to truth; (828)

(33) My investigation takes new turn; (889)

(34) Every moment we are approaching nearer. (876)

The sheer number of metaphorical expressions as well as their variation show that the identification of the case with a journey is one of the most common forms of figurative language in Chan's speech, allowing coherent interpretation of apparently conflicting expressions. The work of a detective develops in time, implying movement and evolution, combined with effort consistently directed to a desired end: these elements are typically associated with the idea of a journey, as is the case in one of the most famous cognitive metaphors described by Lakoff and Jolson (1980), *LIFE IS A JOURNEY*.

A few conventional metaphors exploit reference to natural objects. Among them:

(35) I disentangle this web; (853)

(36) Our visit is not without fruit; (863)

(37) He [Mr. Van Horn] may be able to cast little light. (841)

In (37) the idea of light as an agent of clarification is similar to (28). Moreover, it can be noted that in (37) the usual elimination of the article, apart from making the sentence ungrammatical, results in an ambiguous evaluation of Mr. Van Horn's ability to provide useful information.

4.5. Living metaphors

Living metaphors in Chan's speech show a high level of occurrence (31.8%). Occasionally, however, it has been difficult to draw a line between them and other more conventional figures. Despite the theoretical differences illustrated above, actual occurrences sometimes show an expansion of a conventional metaphor, the creative rewording of an idiom or the metaphorical exploitation of an idiomatic structure—all developed to the point that it is difficult to deny the projective character of the figure. Consider for example:

(38) Perfect alibis have way of turning imperfect without warning. (738)

The personification of alibis (in Example 38) is only a prerequisite for a consistent interpretation, which triggers the idea of rebellious behaviour, unexpectedness, and ultimately total uncertainty about what was initially taken as true. Example (38) is not the only occurrence of a metaphor referred to the case or one of its elements, as shown in the following examples:

(39) Alibis have been so rudely shattered; (778)

(40) I go away with one more puzzle burning in my pocket. (837)

It can be noted that these expressions are not totally new creations, but expand on a rather usual association (an alibi as a construction that falls to pieces, a puzzle creating unbearable tension, etc.), which are re-framed to trigger projective interpretations (consider, for example, the use of *rudely* in (39)).

In (41) two different images are ironically connected in a metaphorical chain, and irony also combines with metaphor in (42):

(41) You quench the fire of my curiosity by tossing upon it a handful of straw.
(716)

(42) I humbly suggest you have old Hawaii moon overhauled at once. (787)

Finally, a few words of comment are due in order to explain the title of the book, or the metaphor of death as a black camel. The meaning of the title is not immediately clear to the average reader, until Chan himself explains it in the following line:

(43) Time to be philosophical. You have perhaps heard old Eastern saying.
“Death is the black camel that kneels unbid at every gate.” Sooner or later—does it matter which? (725)

The explanation is framed in a philosophical mood with explicit reference to Eastern wisdom. This is of course in tune with the image of the character constructed by the author across his books. Actually, the proverb is not Chinese. In a slightly different form (“Death is the black camel that kneels before every man’s door”), the *Routledge Book of World Proverbs* (Stone, 2007) classifies it as Arabian, while the *Multicultural Dictionary of Proverbs* (Cordry, 1997) indicates a Turkish origin (and, in similar wording, Persian). It was popularised in the XIX century by the Algerian Leader Emir Abdelkader El Djezairi, an Algerian military and religious leader, an Islamic scholar who unexpectedly became the chief of armed tribesmen. The saying can also be

found some years later in a science fiction short story by Robert Heinlein, *Life-line* (1939), where it combined with the expression of a prophetic attitude: “I can give you advance billing of the Angel of Death. I can tell you when the black camel will kneel at your door.” All considered, the saying was not completely new to a Western readership, but in Bigger’s (2017[1929]) book it is retrieved as an expression of generically “Eastern” wisdom—though, of course, camels prototypically belong to a desert, possibly *middle* eastern, environment. Not only does Chan quote the proverb (thus solving the obscurity of the novel’s title), but he also exploits its metaphorical potential, as in the following example:

(44) The black camel has knelt at plenty famous gate tonight. (728)

Apart from the recurring omission of the article, (44) shows how the key element of a proverbial expression is turned into the metaphorical representation of a concept (death) apparently inconsistent with its literal meaning. The link triggering a consistent interpretation lies in the memory of an exotic saying, which had been previously evoked in the text, thus becoming part of a shared frame of knowledge.

5. Conclusion

As seen from the analysis, Chan’s speech patterns are rich in metaphors, always infuse originality with conventionality, and blend some intercultural references in a simplified and never too obscure key: in an era of racism, he made a non-white person likeable, to the point that he could outsmart and arrest white counterparts, without upsetting the (white) audience. This because he is not really a representation of the Other, but an instance of what Ma defined as “Zen kitsch,” i.e., “popular culture’s wishful duplications of what alleges to be the transcendental familiar from Eastern mysticism” (Ma, 2014, pos. 1051). The fictional Asian Other thus created by the dominant majority represents a way to compensate for the loss of traditions in the modern era by projecting adrift values that used to be onto a “kitschy and sentimental” imaginary Other (Ma, 2014, pos. 1054) that can be appreciated because it is recognisable. Following the audience’s expectations, Chan uses a figurative language sprinkled with pseudo-Daoist references to nature and instances of “pseudo-Confucian aphoristic wisdom” (Huang, 2010, pos. 279). However, their meaning is rather obvious, and they are modified just enough to sound slightly unusual, or at times made more ‘exotic’ by lexical choices. This all contributes to the standardised imagery of the “Zen cop,” whose abilities come from replicating a millenary wisdom that uniforms all Asians in general and Chinese in particular—as Chan himself says, all “Chinese people are psychic” (Biggers, 2017[1929], p. 701). This skilful mix of obvious and unusual, along

with an admirable intelligence always downplayed by a limited language proficiency, made Charlie Chan “a sage: wise, calm, responsible, and commonsensical man who also happens to be a hilarious wisecracker” (Huang, 2010, pos. 284) in the eyes of his viewers.

Another set of considerations must be done in terms of the methodological challenges faced during this analysis. In particular, even with clear annotation criteria, the distinction between conventional and creative figures was not always clear-cut: apparently common sayings were modified so as not to sound completely familiar, and creativity was present, but did not go as far as making the figures of speech unintelligible. As mentioned, Charlie Chan is an orientalist creature, with stereotyped features which make him recognisable as the foreign Other imagined by the dominant majority. This also implied another difficulty in the annotation: the detective is designed as a non-native speaker, with limited skills and issues in all language components (Renna & Santulli, 2021), which means that even the most conventional idiom or metaphor is often reworded creatively. In this sense, a study of figurative language that draws examples across languages and cultural contexts requires a vast knowledge, but in turn allows to select perfect examples to fit in criteria. On the other hand, when a text is taken as a whole, difficulties in categorisation may emerge more frequently, as different categories may coexist simultaneously within one occurrence, or some occurrences may even escape categorisations tout-court. This is why a recommendation emerging from the analysis presented here would certainly be to try and test figurative language classifications taking texts in their entirety. This way, new methodologies may be implemented to help take into account discrepancies, incoherences and blurred boundaries.

Authors' Statement

The article is the result of the collaboration between the two authors. However, Dora Renna penned sections 1-4.1, and Francesca Santulli authored sections 4.2-5 of the article.

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