A Linguistic Introduction to Chinese Languages

胡蔭亭
Joseph Yam Ting Woo

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漢語簡介

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To Queen Elizabeth School
on its 50th Anniversary

Foreword 感言

I was too young to be among the students who attended Queen Elizabeth School in the first year of its existence; however, my elder brother Peter has that distinction. I recall those days only dimly, as I was all of eight at the time, but I do remember that Peter had to take the Sheung Wan ferry across the harbour, then walk up Western Street to King's College, where Queen Elizabeth School was in session while its campus was being built.

Four years later, I did have the privilege of being in the first Form One class. I still remember that first morning. We were in the school hall with all the other students. After a few words from Mr. Cheong Wai Fung, the principal, we were told to accompany Miss Baptista to our classroom, as we were deemed not sufficiently proficient in English to understand the rest of the assembly. That was how my seven-year sojourn at Queen Elizabeth School began.

In looking back, I have come to realize how remarkable this school was. In those days, I was only concerned with the routine of going to school, attending classes, and doing homework. Little did I know that the balanced education I was receiving was both rare and precious. I have always appreciated the fact that students at Queen Elizabeth School were not shunted into the science track or the arts track prematurely. In the School Certificate Examination at the end of Form Five, all but one student in my class took ten full subjects —English language, Chinese language, English literature, Chinese literature and history, history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology.

In the course of my career, I have been in many secondary schools, frequently as an evaluator of certain programs. In all honesty, none of them can compare with Queen Elizabeth School. At far too many, students lived in fear of being bullied physically or emotionally. Moreover, low expectations for student achievement combined with unchallenging curricula and uninspired and uninspiring instruction inevitably give rise to a self-fulfillling prophesy. Such conditions were utterly unthinkable in my schooling.

Over half a century, I have learned so many things that I cannot always identify the source of certain forms of knowledge. However, I am absolutely certain as to when and where I acquired idiomatic English. It happened in the library of Queen Elizabeth School. Having always been an insatiable reader, I considered it marvelous that the school library had such a large collection of adventure stories and mysteries. In those days, each form could go to the library after school one day a week, and each student could borrow two books. This I did week after week, until it was very difficult for me to find anything new to read by the time I was in Form Five. And then I noticed that a wonderful thing had happened. I had acquired the English language subconsciously, and was able to think and write in it effortlessly. This came about even though I had few opportunities to speak the

language in my daily life. Still, I could converse in English because I had absorbed the dialogues from the stories I read.

These first halting steps in second language acquisition marked the beginning of my journey through the realm of linguistics, which has culminated in this book.

After graduation, Queen Elizabeth School did not disappear from my life. Like most of my classmates, I entered University of Hong Kong. Many of us lived in the same hall, and we continued to have classes together. It was only after I left Hong Kong in 1969 to attend University of California at Berkeley that our ties were severed. Fortunately, I re-established contact with the school in the 1990s and have since got together with many of my former classmates during visits to Hong Kong. It was a particular pleasure to see Mr. Tsui See Ming, my mathematics teacher, again. I am indebted to Mr. Tsui for many things, not the least of which is his having introduced me to Steam and Stew Inn in Wan Chai. In recent years, I have acquired an absolute intolerance for monosodium glutamate, and because the chefs at Steam and Stew Inn are militantly anti-MSG, it is the *only* Chinese restaurant in Hong Kong at which I can eat Cantonese food to my heart's content.

Several years ago, I showed Mr. Tsui an earlier version of this book, and he in turn showed it to Mr. Tsoi Heung Sang. Mr. Tsoi was in Form Five when I entered Queen Elizabeth School, and I still remember his Shylock in the South House entry in the Drama Competition that year. I am honored that Mr. Tsoi liked the book so well that he recommended it for publication by the Old Students Association as the first in a series of books by alumni. This is how Queen Elizabeth School Old Students Association came to be my publisher, and I am deeply grateful to Mr. Tsui and Mr. Tsoi for bringing this project to fruition after so many years.

Preface 序

This book is intended for anyone who is interested in Chinese languages. It contains information that may be particularly useful for teachers of English to speakers of Chinese languages, as well as for clinicians who assess such students. I hope that it appeals to both native speakers and those who know nothing about these languages.

The genesis of the book dates back to 1984, when a Hispanic school board member in one of the community school districts of New York City expressed interest in knowing more about Chinese in order to serve the students better. He asked for introductory books and articles, but I could not think of any that I would recommend. Most books about Chinese languages are more concerned with surface features than structure, so readers are provided with nothing more than isolated facts. Consequently, I wrote a brief article myself, introducing the different languages usually lumped together under the name "Chinese," as well as the sounds and structures of Cantonese and Mandarin. Colleagues at Hunter College who read the article urged me to submit it to a journal for publication. As I worked on the article, it grew longer and longer until it became a book. In 1986, I used that version to teach a course on Chinese linguistics at Hunter College for teachers of Chinese students in Community School District Two. The reception being very favorable, I decided to revise the manuscript for publication.

Unfortunately for the book, I became a full-time employee of the New York City Board of Education, and my focus shifted from bilingual education to test development. Seven years passed before I returned to the book again, spurred on by the need for a text for another course on Chinese linguistics at Hunter, this time for students training to become educational evaluators. In the course of those seven years, I had learned much more about Chinese languages. In part, this was because Chinese linguistics made great strides during the 1980s. Many definitive books and papers were written, and the whole discipline was transformed. In addition to these advances, my work as a test developer also deepened my understanding of Chinese languages. While adapting tests for Hispanic, Chinese, and Haitian students, I was confronted with the differences between languages. In particular, I saw how linguistic distortion destroys even the most culturally sensitive test if it is translated. Thus, when I returned to the book, I found that my views on the structure of Chinese languages had changed substantially. As a result, the revision of the book I used for my course in 1994 was almost entirely different from the first draft.

I considered publishing the book in 1995. However, the insights I gained from teaching that course and the many useful questions and suggestions from my students impelled me to revise the book yet again. Moreover, the second generation of Chinese input programs

allowed me to enter Chinese characters into English word-processing programs. Not only did this result in a more aesthetically pleasing product, but I was also freed from the cutting and pasting of Chinese characters, which made the production of the first two drafts so onerous. Therefore, I began what was to be the final revision in that year. Again, pressures of work, as well as bugs in both the Chinese and English software, delayed the completion for several years.

At long last the book is ready. For the most part, it is a synthesis of what I have learned from my reading. However, it does contain new material, which is the fruit of my reflection on language. It is my wish that readers will learn something new, and be entertained while doing so.

I am indebted to Kit-Ling Doris Che for having introduced me to a number of the books from which I have learned so much. I am grateful to my youngest brother, Timothy Yam Ling Woo, a librarian, who provided me with many books on Chinese linguistics, as well as the journals *Chinese Language*, *Dialect*, and *Communications in Chinese Language*. Above all, I wish to thank Don M. Braswell for editing the manuscript, from the inceptional article to the final revision. His polishing of the language has made the book infinitely more readable.

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Introduction 引言

Even though one quarter of the population of the world speak Chinese as their first language, for some reason it is considered exotic by Americans. From a structural standpoint, Chinese is actually closer to English than are many Indo-European languages. The impression of irreconcilable differences probably stems from the writing system. To someone whose first language is represented alphabetically, using characters for a comparable purpose might seem bizarre. It is not surprising that all sorts of myths have sprung up about Chinese. The following three are the most pernicious—that the non-Mandarin languages are dialects; that Chinese words are monosyllabic; and that Chinese characters are ideographic.

Such errors are particularly egregious for American teachers with Chinese students in their classes. Without an intelligent knowledge of the students' first language, it is difficult to find effective ways to teach them a second one. As more and more Chinese students are entering American schools, this problem has become critical.

The literature on teaching English to speakers of Chinese languages is quite sparse. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's review article, "What We Do and Don't Know About Chinese Learners of English: A Critical Review of Selected Research," lists ninety-two items. It is the best introduction to the subject and probably covers most, if not all, relevant materials published in the United States. Though more is available now than there was in the 1970s, it is still not a large body of literature.

This book is an attempt to fill the void. Most of the available literature describes only Mandarin or Cantonese. This is inadequate, as large numbers of speakers of other Chinese languages—in particular, Fukienese—have immigrated to the United States. Moreover, the majority of these books or articles are either too technical or too brief and misleading. In addition, they are frequently marred by a naive view of Chinese languages, repeating common errors time and again. In this book, I hope to remedy this by being as non-technical as possible while providing essential and accurate information. In particular, I want to correct numerous misconception about Chinese languages. Much of the information is drawn from Chinese sources, especially for non-Mandarin languages. Anyone with some knowledge of English phonology and grammar should find this book understandable.

Linguistic study of a language usually consists of five parts—phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Phonology is the study of the sound system; morphology, the structure of words; syntax, the structure of sentences; semantics, the meaning of

utterances; and pragmatics, language usage. Of these five areas in Chinese languages, we have the most complete knowledge of phonology. Systematic dialect surveys conducted since the 1920s provide clear understanding of the sound systems of the more widely-spoken languages and dialects. In the 1980s, great advances were made in the study of the morphology and syntax of Chinese languages, so much so that a definitive grammar of Mandarin is probably within reach. Some progress has been made in Chinese pragmatics with the introduction of sociolinguistics in the 1980s. However, the field is still rather fragmentary. Semantics has lagged behind the other four areas, probably because it is less language-specific. This book will concentrate on phonology, morphology, and syntax, with briefer chapters on pragmatics and the written language. Comparison with English will be made whenever appropriate.

The International Phonetic Alphabet is used almost entirely in the chapters on phonology and transliteration. Elsewhere, whenever I have transliterated Chinese words, I have used English sounds for an approximate rendition, unless an exact rendition is required. The system is explained in Chapter 4. I have not used *pinyin* or the Wade-Giles systems, as their outlandish combinations of letters usually dumbfound anyone who does not speak Mandarin.

Books and articles mentioned in the book are listed in the bibliography. Within the main portion of the text, they will be cited by name of author and title only.

References and Further Reading

Very few books on Chinese languages have been written in English. S. Robert Ramsey's *The Languages of China* is the most comprehensive and comes closest to the aim of the present book. It deals with the languages of China, not just Chinese languages. Thus it includes information on Chuang-Chia, Mongol, Tibetan, Uighur, Hmong, and many other minority languages. Consequently, the attention given to Chinese languages per se is necessarily limited. This is especially true for southern Chinese languages. The treatment of phonology is fuller than that of grammar, which is rather superficial. No information on pragmatics is provided. The greatest drawback of the book is that the author is not a native speaker of any of the Chinese languages. Because the information was obtained second-hand, all the ossified errors in Chinese linguistics (see Chapter 3) are reiterated in this book. It is also disappointing that with regard to the three myths about Chinese languages, the author allows extralinguistic factors to influence his treatment. Deferring to Chinese nationalism, he persists in calling regional languages "dialects." He interprets "monosyllabic" to mean "monosyllabic morphemes" and concludes that Chinese is monosyllabic. He does not discuss the nature of Chinese characters in the chapter on the writing

system. On the positive side, he describes in detail how Mandarin came to be adopted as the national language. There is also a chapter on the development of Chinese languages.

Another general introduction is John DeFrancis' *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*. This is a linguistically accurate book. The emphasis is on correcting misconceptions about Chinese characters. It also provides a brief introduction to Chinese languages. The one drawback is that DeFrancis does not seem to know any of the non-Mandarin language, so only Mandarin is described in the book.

The best English introduction to Chinese languages is still R. A. D. Forrest's *The Chinese Language*. In addition to describing the modern languages, it also provides much information on Old Chinese and Middle Chinese. The most serious drawback is that the book was written in 1948, before the flowering of Chinese linguistics during the past forty years. Forrest uses the reconstructions of Bernhard Karlgren, which have since been modified by other Chinese linguists. Again, there is more on phonology than grammar. Nevertheless, this is the book that I would recommend to someone who wants to know about Chinese languages and is unable to read Chinese sources.

For those able to read Chinese, there is a wealth of books. As most of these are published in the People's Republic of China, they are in simplified characters. A few have been reprinted in traditional characters in Hong Kong. Of several general introductions to Mandarin, the two best known are Zhang Zhigong's *Modern Chinese* (张志公：《现代汉语》, in three volumes) and Hu Yushu's *Modern Chinese* (胡裕樹：《現代漢語》). Both are comprehensive and cover phonology, grammar, the writing system, and rhetoric.

There are two general introductions to regional languages—Zhan Bohui's *Modern Chinese Dialects* (詹伯慧：《现代汉语方言》) and Yuan Jiahua's *An Outline of Chinese Dialects* (袁家骅等：《汉语方言概要》). Contrary to its title, the latter is more detailed than the former and provides more examples. The former seems to be based on the pre-Cultural Revolution version of the latter. Mandarin dialects are described as well as non-Mandarin languages. For each representative language, tables of initials, finals, and tones are listed, followed by notes. Then the lexicon and syntax are discussed, but not systematically.

The best sources of accurate information on Chinese languages are four journals, two published in China and two in Hong Kong. They are *Chinese Language* (《中国语文》), *Dialect* (《方言》), *Communications in Chinese Language* (《中國語文通訊》), and *Language Forum* (《語文雜誌》). *Chinese Language* is bimonthly. It does not focus exclusively on Mandarin; it also has articles on regional languages, and thus overlaps *Dialect*. A quarterly, *Dialect* contains ongoing research on Chinese languages and dialects, including phonological surveys and vocabulary lists of lesser known dialects. As *Communications in Chinese Language* is published in Hong Kong, it focuses on Cantonese. *Language Forum* is the journal of the Chinese Language Society of Hong Kong. All four of these journals contain

articles on phonology, grammar, semantics, pragmatics, psycholinguistics, and many other areas. *Communications in Chinese Language* also provides information on translation and teaching of written Chinese to Cantonese speakers. The *Journal of East Asian Linguistics* is much more technical than the four Chinese journals and requires considerable knowledge of general linguistics.

The book can be obtained from:

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Queen Elizabeth School Old Students' Association Secondary School
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