Reflections on the "Unity" of Spoken and Written Chinese and Academic Learning in China

by
William C. Hannas

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William C. Hannas
Department of Chinese and Japanese
Georgetown University

Chinese is not a language. Although treated as a language for political reasons by the governments in Beijing and Taipei eager to unify a culturally diverse country, or as something less than a language by governments in Hong Kong and parts of Southeast Asia, it is in fact a language *group* (*yuzu*), one of four such groups in the Sino-Tibetan language family (Mair 1991). Within this group of languages, most experts (Yuan 1960, Zhan 1981, DeFrancis 1984, Ramsey 1987, Norman 1988) recognize 7 or 8 mutually unintelligible varieties which in any other context would be considered languages in their own right. They include: (1) Mandarin, spoken in northern China, where the capital at Beijing is located, and western China; (2) Wu used by some 80 million speakers in the eastern part of China focusing on Shanghai; (3) Northern and Southern Min used on Taiwan, in China's Fujian Province, and in parts of Southeast Asia; and (4) Yue, often called Cantonese, used in China's south. There are also at least three "transitional" varieties (Gan, Xiang, and Hakka) spoken mainly in China's interior.

Some facts about these different Chinese varieties will shed light on the reality of the Chinese-speaking world, and how this reality affects academic learning. The first point to be made is that each of these Chinese varieties is, as mentioned, completely unintelligible to speakers of other varieties. This unintelligibility is on the order of what is found between the different Romance languages of Europe, which should not be surprising, since both are spread over vast areas and both had their origins in splits from parent languages one and a half millennia ago or possibly even earlier. Although some Chinese people, particularly those who speak standard northern Mandarin, tend to downplay the distinctiveness of these different varieties, these claims tell us more about personal prejudices than about the true situation. In fact, Mandarin speakers have as little success understanding Cantonese as an Italian has understanding Spanish.

Evidence for this is available even outside China, in the example of Mandarin speakers being forced to use English in restaurants to communicate with Cantonese-speaking waiters. Although pieces and snippets can sometimes be grasped from cognate morphemes whose sounds have, in a few cases, not drifted too far apart, this is more the exception than the rule. I have used the Wu variety of Chinese with friends to avoid eavesdropping by surrounding Mandarin speakers, and in turn have been quite effectively shut out of conversations by bilingual Chinese

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shifting from Mandarin to Min. Communication across these different varieties simply does not happen.

Part of the reason is different pronunciations, which vary radically from one Chinese language to the next in number and types of segmental phonemes; in number of phonemic tones, their contours, and their susceptibility to different types of tone sandhi; and in suprasegmental features. Equally important, there are also enormous lexical differences, especially in the common use vocabulary which amplifies the effect of these differences beyond their actual number. Even where the morphemes are cognate, meaning and nuance can vary enough to alter one's understanding of a word completely. Finally, there are significant grammatical differences as well.

Another important fact about the non-Mandarin Chinese languages is that their speakers--with the exception of the Hakka--are distributed into coherent geographical blocks which correspond to those areas of China with the highest concentrations of population. Together, the ratio of non-Mandarin to native Mandarin speakers is about 3-7, which in a country of nearly one billion Han Chinese means that these different Chinese varieties which some people euphemistically call "dialects" have more native speakers than the national languages of many European countries. Perhaps not coincidentally, these non-Mandarin areas are the very parts of China where economic growth has been most dramatic. Although once disparaged, the wealth and progress of their speakers is giving languages like Shanghainese, Cantonese, and Taiwanese a new status even among Mandarin speakers (Hannas and Edelstein 1994).

This linguistic trend is paralleled by a renewed tendency toward regionalism in culture, economy, and politics. It runs counter to efforts that have been taking place in China since the 1920's, and in Taiwan since the early 1950's, to unify the country linguistically through a "national language" known by that name (*guoyu*) in Taiwan and by the term "common speech" (*putonghua*) in China. Although the PRC government supplies a technical definition for "common speech" intended to show its alleged national character, in fact it is roughly coterminous with the Chinese Mandarin spoken north of the Yangtze River basin, and barely distinguishable from the dialect of the country's capital. This is the language of state, used for all affairs of government and as the basis for Chinese language textbooks published in the PRC. Excepting a few well-established pronunciations such as "Taipei," "Nanking," and "Canton," Mandarin sounds are also those by which foreigners know Chinese geography. China's *pinyin* romanization and Taiwan's National Phonetic Alphabet are both based on Mandarin. The two phonetic writing systems were created, in part, to help standardize and spread Mandarin pronunciations throughout the country. Finally, Mandarin is also the language of the state-run education system, from elementary school through college.

And here is the rub. Despite these efforts to popularize Mandarin as a national language, nearly 300 million people--or the percentage of that number who are in school--are listening to lectures, giving them, and preparing assignments and papers in what to them is a second language. "Bilingualism" is the only word to describe what some 30 percent of the Han population exercises while attending school. This number rises if the 200 million non-Han Chinese who speak non-Sinitic languages as their mother tongues are figured in. If this were not bad enough, the Mandarin that is spoken, particularly by lecturers on the college level, is so

colored by the speaker's first language that it is at times incomprehensible to people with different backgrounds. While I know of no studies that measure this, it is well-supported anecdotally and by perennial student complaints like "I can't understand Prof. Zhang's Cantonese accent."

Although this is less of a problem on a local level where students and teachers are more likely to have similar language backgrounds, the difficulty of conducting effective academic discourse increases in higher education where shared backgrounds are less common. We all know the problem from our own experiences with foreign professors in college whose English would be difficult to understand even in familiar contexts. It is no different in China, and may get worse--on a national level, at least--as the tendency toward regionalism and pride in one's native speech increases.

At this point, some readers must be thinking: "What about Chinese characters? Since they represent 'ideas' and not sounds, don't they bridge these speech differences, and make universal *written* exchanges possible?" Not at all. To begin with, despite this popular belief and the fantasies of some Sinologists who should know better, Chinese characters do not represent ideas. They represent the morphemes and syllables of languages, and as such are only slightly more "transparent" to speakers of the different Chinese languages than cognate morphemes spelled and written alphabetically are to speakers of different Romance languages. Moreover, as we have mentioned, not all morphemes are shared by different Chinese languages, which means that the characters used to represent them are to a large degree language-specific. Finally, no writing system--Chinese characters included-- can disguise grammatical differences.

This leads to a simple conclusion: speakers of Cantonese, Min, Shanghainese and other non-standard Chinese varieties are able to read published academic materials because they are reading them in *Mandarin*. Although the phonology generated in the readers' minds when accessing the characters' meanings may be non-Mandarin, or some makeshift contrivance which is neither, the text as a whole cannot be understood by a Chinese who does not know Mandarin any better than a Portuguese speaker reads French. However, the characters do allow Chinese readers of Mandarin as a second language to substitute familiar pronunciations in their minds for the symbols they encounter in print, since the characters, being connected wholistically with syllables, and not with individual phonemes, do not require any particular segmental pronunciation even to be consistent internally.

Far from being a solution, Chinese characters are the worst of both worlds. While offering no magical pathway for the speaker of non-standard Chinese to Mandarin-based literacy, they inhibit the spread of a unified pronunciation by masking the differences in sound, helping to perpetuate the very distinctions they are credited with bridging. Although Mandarin-based *pinyin* texts would, from the central government's viewpoint, offer one way out of the dilemma, there is little chance both for linguistic and cultural reasons of *pinyin* replacing characters outright, particularly in higher education. But there is a real possibility that the many problems associated with character writing will cause the uses of *pinyin* to expand to the point where the system, regarded officially as a "notation," becomes a *de facto* second orthography. This would, at least, make the Mandarin which *is* being used subject to more uniform pronunciations.

Meanwhile, Chinese continue to pay a heavy price intellectually for the luxury of using their traditional writing. Not only do the characters fail to provide the "unity" claimed for them, they also impact adversely on learning in several other ways, particularly in the areas of literacy, computerization, and importation of science and culture. For example, in order to maintain what they mistakenly believe to be a universal panacea for certain linguistic problems, Chinese are spending far too much time mastering the tools of discourse while reaping no demonstrable benefits for themselves or the nation as a whole. Learning Chinese characters is difficult, even under the best of circumstances. Grant that literacy may depend more on economic and cultural factors than on the particular writing system, it is nevertheless apparent that, other things being equal, the would-be learner of a more complicated system begins at a real disadvantage. In the case of Chinese, this handicap persists well into the higher levels of education, when users of alphabetic writing have long since stopped thinking about the mechanics of their writing system and are using it to learn and transmit knowledge.

At the other end of the scale, the claim that "investing" in characters gives literate Chinese greater mastery over the language's morphemes, and hence an advantage over Western students on the college level, is simply wishful thinking. Contrary to certain claims by Japanese linguists (Suzuki 1975, Kato 1979), the meanings of individual characters do *not* add up to an accurate understanding of the term as a whole. Moreover, by forcing people to dismember and analyze words (often artificially), the characters also interfere with one's grasp of the overall concept (Yamada 1987), or trick people into believing they understand the concept when no such understanding has occurred.[2]

Equally damaging, the character writing system makes direct borrowing of foreign vocabulary nearly impossible. Chinese are required either to parse a loanword into its component morphemes and try to match them with semantic equivalents from their own overworked, phonetically impoverished stock, or use the characters as a syllabary with grotesque results. It is one thing for some linguists in Japan and South Korea to extol the alleged "benefits" of Chinese characters, while their own languages freely import tens of thousands of new Western concepts through their *kana* and *hangul* phonetic scripts. But for the Chinese no such solution is possible. Either they somehow work the new concept into their writing system, or fail to adopt it altogether which I suspect is often the case.

Finally, Chinese characters stand in the way of what Asian linguists themselves (Choe 1946, Ho 1974) recognized as one of history's greatest boons to learning: mechanized writing. Although advances in computer technology make it *possible* for Chinese to be written and processed by machines, Choe (1970:10, 198) and Unger (1987:11) have shown that these benefits will always be less and their costs higher than what the same technology provides users of alphabetic scripts. Moreover, by introducing one or more additional steps between the first appearance of an idea and the transformation of that idea into print, Chinese characters are exacting an untold cost on creativity and initiative. Instead of focusing on ideas, precious energy is sacrificed on the mechanics of representing those ideas to the detriment of academic learning.

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[2] A full critique of the "semantic transparency" thesis appears in chapter 6 of the present author's forthcoming book *The Myth of Asian Writing*.

Sooner or later Chinese will begin to ask themselves if the illusory "unity" achieved by pretending there is only one Chinese "language" (and that this language is best written in Chinese characters) really compensates for the obstacles to learning and creation of new knowledge. Ironcially, the adoption of Mandarin-based *pinyin* writing would not only erase most of these barricades to learning, but also provide the unity Chinese seek by presenting the standard language in a form less amenable to local interpretations.

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