

## WHY TEACH *SPOKEN* CHINESE?

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IT IS a commonplace in modern linguistics that the spoken language is primary and that the written language, any written language, is derived. While no linguist seriously challenges this axiom there are a good many conscientious language teachers who fail to see its relevance; they cannot conscientiously teach the spoken language, which they consider to be of questionable utility, in place of the written language, which is of incontestable value. If the modern linguist is to induce any change, he must first show the relevance of a knowledge of the spoken language to the mastery of reading.

A text of written Chinese consists of a continuum of Chinese characters. In modern texts this line is broken by occasional commas or semi-colons and by periods. Unpunctuated texts are generally limited to the classics, and for that reason extremely difficult to read. This rudimentary and unsatisfactory punctuation (commas, semi-colons and periods) is an attempt to suggest to the reader the places where the text must be broken into subsidiary grammatical structures.

The spoken language is much more careful in its indication of grammatical juncture by the use of pause. As Professor Y. R. Chao points out, the first fracture in a simple Chinese sentence is between the subject and the predicate. In the spoken language, with very few exceptions, there is a pause between the subject and predicate; sometimes there is even a "particle of pause." An older system of purely Chinese punctuation indicated this in the writing too, but modern writing systems make no provision for this important item of grammatical information.

There are other breaks almost as important: sometimes the break between a verb and an object, often the break between multiple modifiers and a noun nucleus. The correct isolation of these grammatical complexes is essential to an understanding of a continuum of the language; and in every instance the spoken language provides indications that the written language lacks.

Frequently a person will be reading alone in a text and will meet a rather complex or involved grammatical structure. For

an instant this unforeseen grammatical complexity obscures the meaning. The person will instinctively back up and re-read the problem area, silently or out loud, supplying the pauses that illuminate the grammatical structure. In many crucial instances the spoken language supplies the information necessary to make the written language intelligible.

But the spoken language is important not only for its indication of the pauses that separate grammatical structures, but also for the stresses that help to distinguish morphemes. For instance, the two Chinese characters "east" and "west" may indicate a compound "east and west," or they may indicate a material "thing." There is no distinction between these two significations in the written language. But in the spoken language, stress makes a very clear distinction. If both morphemes are pronounced with a strong stress, it is a co-ordinate structure, and the meaning is "east and west"; if the first morpheme is pronounced with strong stress, and the second with light stress, it is a syntactic word and means "thing."

Here again any ambiguity that may arise in writing is solved by conscious or unconscious recourse to the spoken language.

As the student begins to read more difficult texts, he encounters a more complex grammatical structure; the more complex the grammatical structure, the more acute his need for subsidiary information derived from the spoken language. Thus if a "traditional" teacher stops teaching a student to read written texts before the student reaches difficult texts, he will never be aware of the inadequacy of the foundation he has given the student. For the serious student, a grounding in the spoken language is essential.

This is true in China even when it comes to reading classical texts 1500-2000 years old. For these texts, like their modern counterparts, are not intelligible without specific information about grammatical cuts and stress, which must be brought from a modern spoken variety of Chinese, not necessarily Pekinese.

At this point the traditionalist might very well object that at the present pause and stress are very poorly taught in spoken Chinese courses. They are not seriously analysed in any of the written texts; at present the student generally learns what he does on the basis of mimicry--a primitive teaching-learning situation. I can only agree that these areas must be taught systematically and conscientiously; when they are, perhaps less time can be spent on the spoken language. This is an area where the modern linguist needs correction, and traditionalist criticism is justified.

At the same time we ought to be aware of some of the

cultural factors that give the written language such extraordinary prestige. In China the vast difference between the educated and the uneducated is subsumed in the phrase, "That man knows how to read and write (he recognizes characters)." All the aura the Confucianists gave to education enhances the importance of Chinese characters. Paper with written or printed words on it was to be separated from other paper and burnt in special incinerators, as our forefathers would destroy a soiled flag or a shabby Bible.

Writing is the bond that tied China to outlying areas such as Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, beyond the reach of Chinese political control but considerably indebted to Chinese culture. Within China, the written language was a bond which ties together the many different spoken languages and made the task of the central government of imposing unity so much more possible.

In the West, the Renaissance meant the rediscovery of Greek and Latin culture. Since the spoken language had long been dead there was only the skeleton, the written language. But these dead bones were literally keys to the past, so universities gave them places of honor and prestige in their curricula. Professors found the reading of books and journals in other languages an invaluable accomplishment in their effort to keep ahead of their students and abreast of their colleagues.

In the East and West the prestige of the written language was warranted, for it played such an important part in the cultural life of many centuries.

There are, however, many differences between the cultural life of the twentieth century and that of former centuries that tend to enhance the relevance of the spoken language. The twentieth century has world-wide radio. This means that a native speaker of one language with a powerful radio can listen to many varieties of spoken foreign languages. World-wide telephone will soon be a reality; and world-wide television seems excitingly near. In all these cases, an understanding of the spoken language is more immediately useful than a knowledge of the written language. The widespread circulation of foreign movies, and the interest that centers upon the multi-language meetings of the United Nations all enhance the importance of the spoken languages.

At the same time, cheaper forms of transportation, partly in terms of inflated money, but most especially in terms of time, have made travel to foreign language areas relatively simple. There are very few social scientists, let alone language and literature teachers, who have not had the opportunity to live in an area speaking the language they have studied. Questioning

informants and listening to lectures becomes a source of important information, over-shadowing the unchallenged supremacy that books and journals had in the preceding century.

In such a changing world we must not despise our forefathers for the importance they attached to reading foreign languages, but neither should we apologize for our own attachment to the spoken language. For our century, the spoken language is not only an important means to proficiency in reading, but a respectable end in itself.