## Chinese Ways of Words[1] from a Comparative Perspective

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## Abstract

According to the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, a language influences the mind of its user. This is more or less trivial, but the problems are in the details. It is difficult to make precise what those influences are, be it in general philosophical or in particular empirical-cultural terms. I will give an account of what I take to be basic aesthetic and grammatical features of the Chinese language compared with what we find in Western languages such as Latin or Greek. Then I will indicate what I take to be cultural differences and discuss whether these might be the result of differences in language structure.

Already in 1908, Fenollosa gave a nice description of how language works: "Suppose that we look out of a window and watch a man. Suddenly he turns his head and actively fixes his attention upon something. We look ourselves and see that his vision has been focused upon a horse. We saw, first, the man before he acted; second, while he acted; third, the object toward which his action was directed. In speech we split up the rapid continuity of this action and of its picture into its three essential parts or joints in the right order, and say:

*Man sees horse.*

It is clear that these three joints, or words, are only three phonetic symbols, which stand for the three terms of a natural process. But we could quite as easily denote these three stages of our thought by symbols equally arbitrary, *which had no basis in sound;* for example, by three Chinese characters:

# 人見馬

*Ren jian ma.*

*Man sees horse.*

If we all knew *what division* of this mental horse-picture each of these signs stood for, we could communicate continuous thought to one another as easily by drawing them as by speaking words. We habitually employ the visible lan-

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guage of gestures in much this same manner." (p. 8) Here we have a continuous process: We see a man, we see how he turns his head to look at a horse, and then we see the horse ourselves. There are three "joints" to this development and they are denoted by three words: *Man sees horse.* Fenollosa nicely brings out the flow in time, the continuity of its images, and our cutting out, focusing on, and denoting three parts of this flow by signs or symbols. These parts are "joints" or "stages". What is special about Chinese, at first blush, is the pictorial character of its script. Although linguists today would strongly object to the idea that the script has "no basis in sound", we still can hold on to the fact that the script involves pictorial elements. Thus not only sound and time, but also space and vision do matter in Chinese. Fenollosa goes on to say that "Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature. In the algebraic figure and in the spoken word there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends upon sheer convention. But the Chinese method follows natural suggestion. First stands the man on his two legs. Second, his eye moves through space: a bold figure represented by running legs under an eye, a modified picture of an eye, a modified picture of running legs, but unforgettable once you have seen it. Third stands the horse on his four legs." Fenollosa might be idealizing and romaniticizing a bit too much when he speaks of moving eyes, bold figures, and running legs. But there is something to be said for his description. Many Chinese characters were originally schematic pictures. The *man*-character might originally not have indicated two legs, but arm and leg. The *sees*-character might not have involved two legs, but a hand and a leg. And it is also not clear to me that the four dots in the *horse*-character originally meant four legs and not rather legs, tail, and mane. For the etymology of these three Chinese characters, see Li Leyi, pp. 277, 157, 209. Maybe scholars know more about this by now. But such objections are not relevant here: The fact remains that many Chinese characters do have pictorial elements, and that we today easily conjure up images and meanings when we learn, use, and see Chinese characters, for instance on advertising signs or on menus in restaurants. That we sometimes form wrong ideas is another story.

After this introduction and the information and picture it provides, we can now turn to the Sapir-Whorf thesis. In 1941, Benjamin Lee Whorf wrote: "We cut up and organize the spread and flow of events as we do, largely because, through our mother tongue, we are parties to an agreement to do so, not because nature itself is segmented in exactly that way for all to see" (p. 240). If there is some truth to this "being parties to an agreement" having an influence on how we "cut up and organize the spread and flow of events", this influence might work itself out in special ways in the case of the Chinese language due to the special characteristics of the Chinese script. Fenollosa stresses that Chinese follows the natural flow of events, but Whorf doubts this, not for Chi-

nese in particular but for languages in general. He argues that we also follow our mother tongue and thereby see the world in ways that create pictures reflecting not only the world but also our linguistic dispositions. The Chinese language then might lead to pictures different from the ones arrived at with the aid of Western languages that are informed by Ancient Greek and Latin. To bring this out, we need a more detailed picture of the Chinese language, which I will provide in the following. But one lesson can already be learned from Fenollosa: Alphabetic letters are arbitrary signs, whereas Chinese characters have symbolic and pictorial elements. The former follow spoken words, but the latter don't (at least not so much). They do less of that and more of something else, as we shall see.

At other places I have argued that the Chinese language involves us more directly and immediately into the world outside and in our actions than do languages like Latin and Ancient Greek (Wenzel 2007, pp. 307–9). Besides the pictorial element of the script, which Fenollosa has pointed out already, there are other factors to back up this claim. Chinese is an "isolating" language. First, in classical Chinese and basically also in modern Chinese, each word has one syllable. Chinese is a monosyllabic language. Second, there is no alphabet and each character stands for a whole word. A character is quadratic in shape and more compact and complete by itself. Third, Chinese has almost no morphology. There are no declensions and no conjugations. A little reflection will show us that this must be internally related to the fact that Chinese is monosyllabic and has no alphabet. These features have led Wilhelm von Humboldt to call Chinese an "isolating" language (Humboldt 1979). This classification still holds today. Having no morphology, Chinese lacks grammar. It almost exclusively relies on syntax. It is word order that takes central stage. Fenollosa has seen this as an advantage, namely as a form of freedom to allow language users to follow processes in nature and not to be hindered by grammatical rules. Declension, conjugation, and requirements such as that there has always to be a verb and a subject in each sentence, etc., can be felt to be superfluous, burdensome, and a hindrance to one's flow of thought and feeling. As a poet, Fenollosa has a point. And not without reason it is poetry that has always been so important and most highly valued in Chinese literary traditions. On top of this, the script has also a particular aesthetic appeal that comes out in calligraphy. Nevertheless, it seems to me that something is lost, too. In Chinese there is no morphology, as we have it for instance in Ancient Greek, German, or French, and it seems to me that morphology has its value, too. If it is absent, something is lost, and I will point out what I think the consequences might be. Here I have my own ideas and tentative theories.

An advantage of morphology that I see is that it creates a certain abstract net of relations. I call it a "systematic scheme of variations", SSV (see Wenzel 2007, p. 303). The tables of declension and conjugation create a certain net of

relations that any noun, verb, or adjective must follow. This net is abstract, but it creates a certain order, among the words and then also among the things in the world that the words stand for. A poet is right to say that there is something forced about such a net and that it is not always necessary or even suitable to express the richness of feelings and associations in our lives. It often fixes more than is necessary, or even more than might be good. Chinese on the other hand is particularly good at creating metaphors. Grammatical freedom and the two more loosely related aspects of writing and speaking create possibilities. But a scientist or a scientifically minded philosopher might be glad about such an abstract net and the clarity it provides. Such a systematic scheme can appear artificial and too simple when applied to the richness of our experiences. Such application can appear to be forced. It often does not do justice to the complexities of the natural processes that we encounter. Nevertheless, I see an advantage that comes with the existence of such a morphological net of systematic variations. It is not only the sciences that can profit from it. We also find in our everyday lives that such a net plays a role during our processes of reflective thought. It creates a certain abstract but nevertheless reliable frame of reference that can be helpful in our search for orientation. Here I venture to suggest connections with the idea of autonomy.

If on the one hand Chinese draws us more into the visible world, a language more grammatically informed on the other hand allows us to create a certain distance to the outside world. Grammar indeed is somewhat artificial. There is often something arbitrary about it. Just think of the gender cases in German! But this artificiality creates, I suggest, the possibility of distancing oneself from the outside world while still finding something to hold on to – namely, a structured network of thoughts to live with. This can be a chance for autonomy, because it is here that we have to set up something new, rules and maxims that we freely set up for ourselves and choose to follow. Such rules need to be abstract. They must stand apart from the particular situation we are facing. They are normative and not descriptive, and we must develop them ourselves. We cannot just go with the flow.

There is a further aesthetic aspect that I wish to discuss. In Chinese there are several thousand characters but there are only thirty or so letters in an alphabet. Even if we break down the Chinese characters into basic elements and strokes, there are still many of those and they are composed in individual two-dimensional ways for each individual character. They are not lined up one-dimensionally as we find to be the case with alphabetic letters forming a word. Thus there comes a certain density with the Chinese script that we do not find in Western alphabetic scripts. No wonder that calligraphy has become so important in Chinese aesthetics!

The pictorial elements and the grammatical isolation we find in Chinese give force to each individual character. At the same time we need to be more sensitive to the context. The unusual richness of homophony, the lack of morphology, and the general isolation we find in Chinese, require and create context sensitivity in the language user. When we leave the linguistic side and turn to broader cultural considerations, we can find empirical studies that confirm a higher *perceptual* sensitivity to backgrounds and circumstances in Asians compared to Westerners (see Nisbett). There are well-known stereotypes that Asians see the world as being more complex and always changing, as cyclic and not linear, as better understood in terms of flexible part-whole relationships such as 陰陽 (*Yin* and *Yang*) and 風水 (*Feng Shui*) than under strict universal rules, and that it is for instance typical for speakers of Chinese that they have developed acupuncture and not surgery. These stereotypes seem not to be completely wrong. I think that such perceptual context sensitivity not only goes well along with but is even causally linked with linguistic context sensitivity. Of course it is difficult to prove such general claims. But the case is not hopeless.

There are studies from empirical psychology and socio-linguistics that at least give us some examples of what I think can be taken as proofs of specific influences of language on perception. I give two such examples. (a) The rather arbitrary gender distribution of nouns in German or Spanish affects the perception of the language user. The word for 'key' is masculine in German: *der Schüssel*, and feminine in Spanish: *la llave*, and German language users tend to associate a key with masculine characteristics while Spanish language users tend associate it with feminine features. Such experiments can be conducted with pictures and without the use of words. I think that the causes are indeed linguistic and not cultural, because once a linguistic distribution has been made it stays fixed, whereas cultural associations change more easily. Culture follows language here. It follows the linguistic settings. That the linguistic influence can be singled out can be seem more clearly in the following example. (b) Words often have two different meanings and then affect associations between these two meanings. The Chinese words 上 (*shang*) and 下 (*xia*) are both used to express temporal as well as spatial relations. The word 上 means 'above' as well as 'previous', as 上個月, 'previous month'. Similar phenomena can be found in any language. There is nothing special about Chinese at this point. But we can use such double meanings of words to show the influence of language on perception: Experiments have been conducted in which Mandarin speakers are asked about the temporal relations of various months while they see objects floating vertically or horizontally on a screen. The reaction time is shorter when they see vertical motion. English speakers react faster when they see horizontal movement. No wonder, in English we say the past is *behind* us and the future is still *ahead* of us. We look *forward* to the future. English speakers think of time horizontally, whereas in Chinese we

do so vertically. In the test, a Chinese person can even be asked in English, but he or she still thinks in Chinese. The point now is that we can train a native English speaker to use words indicating vertical spatial relations to express temporal relations. After some time such a person behaves in the Chinese way. Again, the point I am trying to make here is not the difference between horizontal and vertical as such, but the influence of language on perception in each case. For similar studies or more details, see Gentner, Boroditski, and Wenzel (pp. 310–11).

To sum up: Chinese has a certain aesthetic quality but lacks a grammatical one. On the one hand, context sensitivity, perceptual or grammatical, has its advantages. It can create openness, flexibility, and adaptability. On the other hand, an abstract morphological scheme invites precise and rule-governed thought in general forms. The generality here lies not in the words but in the net of formal relations.

This observation might serve as an explanation, or at least as a correlate, to the fact that the Chinese have not developed exact sciences. Although they early on developed sophisticated technologies and for instance discovered Pascal's triangle before Pascal did, they have not come up with logic and the axiomatic sciences. Nor have they written any grammar for their own language. Instead, they have preferred to stay close to particular cases and applications. Ironically, it might seem, with the invention of the computer, the West appears to be losing touch with the idealistic axiomatic methods that we have inherited from Euclid and that were still cherished in the French Bourbaki school of the 20th century and in algebraic geometry as developed by people such as Alexandre Grothendieck. Instead, the West now too, it appears, focuses more on approximations and applications.

Maybe surprisingly it turns out that English is similar to Chinese. Both have very little morphology. Humboldt already pointed this out over a century ago, in 1826. But these two languages are now becoming the dominating languages in the world. English is already the international language, and more and more people are now learning Chinese. I wonder whether it is an accident that these two "successful" languages are both morphologically poor. During 4000 years of history, China has relied on its script to unite its empire. As this script is not phonetic, it allows for a great variety of different pronunciations. Many different people can use it. Chinese therefore in this regard is ahead of English, one might think. But I wonder where we are heading, especially now at the time of globalization. Is this development a coincidence, or might it be true that a morphologically rich language is more demanding and can therefore only be developed and maintained by a relatively small and elite society, as we find in Athens in Ancient Greece? Is it that only a society that can afford to think about axiomatic geometry and do abstract philosophy can nourish and sustain

a language that is grammatically as demanding as is Ancient Greek? Is it the case therefore that with globalization, the internet, and mass education that such elite demands cannot be met and that therefore such languages must die out, together with their ideals?

One might object to these speculations that the English-speaking world has developed the exact sciences in spite of the fact that English has little morphology. It should therefore not matter whether a language has a rich morphology or not. But I would counter this objection by pointing out that the English-speaking world has inherited cultural ideals from the Ancient Greeks and thus has indirectly been informed by Greek morphology.

Similarly one might object that Japanese and Korean have more grammar then does Chinese, and that Japan and Korea are equally highly context-sensitive societies comparable with the Chinese (Nisbett). Thus perceptual and social context sensitivity should be independent from language. But again, I would point out that Japan and Korea have been culturally influenced and informed by the Chinese, linguistically as well as culturally. They have used Chinese characters and Japan still does so today, using about 2000 Chinese characters for key terms and basic expressions. Thus the tentative claims I have made refer to the past and roots of our cultures.

Errata
p. 123, last paragraph, line 13, "seem" should be "seen"
p. 125, first paragraph, line 2, "that" after "education" should be deleted
p. 125, last paragraph, line 2,"then" should be "than"

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