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Integrating Chinese linguistic research and language teaching and learning

An introduction

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Linguistic research and language teaching have generally been viewed as two separate types of academic endeavor, each with its own priorities and practices. While linguists have been preoccupied with uncovering patterns of language and building theories of language structure, rarely are they concerned with issues in language pedagogy. Language teaching practitioners, on the other hand, often encounter teaching and learning issues that are not readily addressed by theoretical linguistic research and find themselves in need of enriching their knowledge about the language for better-informed pedagogy and of finding the right type of linguistic work to help them to do so. This collection, with eleven papers mostly presented at the 27th North American Conference on Chinese Linguistics (NACCL-27), held at UCLA in April 2015, stands as one of the rare concerted efforts toward a meaningful integration of theory and practice.

The need for such synergy and boundary-crossing seems particularly acute at this juncture given the fact that Chinese has become an increasingly commonly taught second language in the US and elsewhere. To wit, a 2015 Modern Languages Association survey shows that while enrollment in most foreign language classes at US colleges were down, Chinese is one of the few that saw an increase (Goldberg et al. 2015). In addition to the demand from the field of teaching Chinese as a second/foreign language (CSL/CFL), there are deeper reasons for practitioners of both sides to prioritize the integration of the two strands of academic endeavors. Here, I can offer only a few quick points for contemplation.

First, truly insightful linguistic findings should find their value in applications such as language teaching; and without active exploration of possibilities, it will be difficult to judge how relevant any theoretical framework can be to applied fields such as language teaching. Of course I am not suggesting that all theoretical work must entail an immediate and direct application; but we do know that without actively engaging in explorations of possibilities, it would be difficult to see potentials of theory for application. A recent inspiring example comes from the

field of Conversation Analysis (CA), a robust theoretical framework for analyzing ordinary social interaction. Given the fact that CA is concerned with how people create and maintain social order through language use in everyday situations, it would seem natural for CA to be applied to second language acquisition (SLA). However, as researchers show, this is far from being straightforward. In the case of CA and Chinese SLA, as He (2004) and Young and He (1998) show, CA can be instrumental in areas such as teaching, especially with regard to the teacher's sequential organization of talk and its impact on the learner, and assessment of the learner's conversation skills, but CA is less useful for studying non-observable processes and events. In fact, the entire special issue of the *Modern Languages Journal* (2004, 88.iv) was dedicated to the issue of CA and SLA, with both pros and cons contemplated by scholars both in and outside the CA field. This is exactly what is needed for the Chinese SLA field: researchers from multiple theoretical linguistic fields need to think deeply and creatively about how their frameworks can be brought to bear on Chinese SLA and do so in concrete terms – before we can declare the usefulness of any theory in advance.

Another point to be made in the context of synergy and integration is that theoretical linguistics works need to be transformed into materials that are suitable for language teaching practitioners, mainly in the service of professional development and teacher training. Here we can draw on discourse analysis (in English) as an illustration. In the field of English discourse analysis, researchers such as Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy and their associates have done remarkable work in bridging the gap between theoretical work and teacher training. Many of their works, e.g. *Discourse Analysis for Teachers* (McCarthy, 1991), *From Corpus to Classroom: Language Use and Language Teaching* (O'Keeffe, McCarthy, and Carter, 2007), lay out current issues in the fields of discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and functional grammar, among others, in ways that are understandable by language teachers and relevant to language teaching. Of course we cannot expect all or most theoretical linguists to be engaged in popularizing their work for practical purposes, but in times of shortage of resources and a great need for important academic work to gain wide societal recognition, it may be wise for the field to make rigorous efforts to encourage the scholarly community to pay more attention to the applied side of the endeavor.

Third, a related issue is that it actually takes tremendous effort and time to translate research into practical language teaching. As anyone who has taught language in the classroom can attest, a theoretically informed curriculum incorporating well-designed teaching materials, highly coordinated teaching plans, stimulating classroom activities, and effective assessment methods is never a small task. In my own case, it took a good eight plus years to come up with just a small set of teaching units demonstrating ways in which naturalistic conversations can

be used as teaching materials (H. Tao, 2011). I readily admit that many other colleagues can do things much better and faster than me, but I think most people would agree that good pedagogical materials and practices grounded in sound theoretical insights demand sustained commitment and tremendous effort.

We would be amiss if we just focus on how theoretical endeavors can benefit applications without pointing out that applications such as language acquisition and teaching can raise fundamental questions for linguistic research. For example, it is well documented that young learners pick up language in chunks, i.e. multi-word units (Peters, 1983; Lieven, Salomo, and Tomasello, 2009): what does this mean for linguistics? How are we going to treat chunks as linguistic units and as a level of representation? Another example would be the acquisition of Chinese tonal patterns by Anglophone speakers, where it is notoriously difficult for learners to produce the same tonal patterns in sequence (e.g. 2+2, 4+4 (or, rising-rising, falling-falling, etc.): what does this mean for phonological theories such as Optimality Theory, which posits such constraints as Obligatory Contour Principle (OCP), which stipulates that adjacent identical elements are prohibited (see Zhang, 2010, for a discussion of the issues raised here)?

All of this point to the intricacy and difficulties in any attempt at integrating theory with practice. And we are certainly not the first in taking on this endeavor in the fields of Chinese linguistics and language teaching and learning. Earlier pioneers such as Y. R. Chao have blazed the trails with remarkable accomplishments, as attested by Chao's *Mandarin Primer*, a Chinese textbook focusing on the spoken language (Chao, 1948). A quick revisit of the seemingly dated textbook reveals that Chao's unparalleled erudition in Chinese linguistic structure and broad view of the Chinese language and the Chinese way of life make this a towering masterpiece, as demonstrated, for example, by the author's attention to intonation and its role in expressing emotion and by highlighting a wide spectrum of speech styles.

The papers in this collection attempt to address various issues along the lines of the major points just outlined above, from a wide range of theoretical frameworks, no less. For example, Audrey Li's paper offers a rare yet systematic account of the implications of a Universal Grammar perspective on language teaching and learning. Among the important questions she raises, the "what" of teaching, the quantity and quality of input in language acquisition, and the discovery procedures for learners to find regularities in the target language, are all worthy of serious consideration by practitioners of any theoretical persuasion.

A couple of papers explore phonetic and phonological issues. Hana Trísková's paper deals with the issue of unstressed function words with tones (classifiers, prepositions, etc.) in Chinese. In addition to a proposal of a taxonomy of unstressed words, she also compares Chinese and English in this respect. As pronunciations of isolated words, often in their citation forms, are typically the focus of pedagogical

activities, this paper draws attention to features that are more typical of connected speech. Looking also at the issue of lexical tones, Hang Zhang explores its interaction with sentential level focal prominence (involving pitch range, intensity, and duration): what happens when stress is placed on a syllable of various tonal contours? By examining the behaviors of a group of English and Japanese learners on non-native tonal production, Zhang reveals various error types in light of the learner's language background and syllable combinations, which is followed by specific suggestions for teaching to speakers of different languages and on different lexical tonal patterns.

Grammatical issues are the focus of a number of papers in this collection. Chiara Romagnoli's paper employs experimental methods to test the effect of knowledge types on the learner's proficiency level. The author shows how explicit knowledge is positively correlated to language proficiency and underlines, at the same time, the need to increase learner's implicit knowledge. In order to do so, it is suggested that a more communicative approach rather than the traditional grammar-translation approach should be used in language instruction as it fosters learners' knowledge development. Jidong Chen provides a longitudinal study of a child acquiring Chinese argument structure. The paper reports some intriguing patterns of development – for example, theme-only structure and single argument constructions in general see the most tokens in child language, findings aligning well with some of the discourse-based studies of adult language use. Chen's paper raises the issue of what to teach as far as verbal expressions are concerned. Finally, Qian and Garnsey's paper deals with processing mechanisms involving classifiers in Chinese. Using modern technologies measuring event-related brain potential (ERP) responses, the authors investigate noun-classifier matching and non-matching patterns in light of brain activities. Based on a comparison of the processing mechanisms in English and Chinese, the authors suggest ways in which classifier instruction, especially to learners with an English first language background, may be done.

The largest group of papers in the volume comes from discourse-based studies using spoken and written texts. Two of these papers have a corpus linguistics orientation. In Zheng-sheng Zhang's paper, the phenomenon of mixed compounds, where two synonymous morphemes – one classical and the other non-classical – form a compound word, is investigated on the basis of a number of written Chinese corpora. Zhang uses their intriguing distribution to affirm the necessity of having two dimensions to account for register variation, i.e. the "literate" and the "classical". A potential pedagogical benefit is an increased general awareness of the complexity of register variation in Chinese and its implication on material selection and sequencing at different proficiency levels. Another corpus-based account is found in Hang Du's paper. Here the corpus data, both spoken and written, come from

her longitudinal research of learners of Chinese who studied abroad in China. Du focuses on the use of *ba*-constructions, finding positive correlation between time spent in China and the effective use of the construction. This paper thus provides a new way of assessing language development, based on corpora.

In contrast with the written data-based studies, a number of papers look at the spoken language for linguistic patterns and pedagogical connections. Liang Tao analyzes a common spoken phenomenon called self-repair, where speakers stop and reorganize the speech in the midst of the conversation. As most current studies focus on repair done by native speakers, this paper makes a contribution by analyzing beginning level learners of Chinese doing repair. The author draws our attention to the fact that self-repair can reveal the learner's meta-linguistic knowledge of the target language (e.g. about syntactic positions of temporal adverbials, need for classifiers in a noun phrase, etc.). The author suggests that this is something that instructors should pay attention to; and moreover, instructors should also attempt to create a positive environment to foster the development of meta-linguistic knowledge in the learner. In Wei Wang's paper, a highly frequent spoken discourse conjunction *ranhou* 'then, and' is analyzed from both the perspectives of conversation structure and discourse prosody (pitch, duration, etc.). As the discourse functions can be abstract and wide-ranging, there is the question of how to teach the extended uses in connection with their prosodic manifestations, to which the author provides concrete instructional samples, including in-class exercise. In the same vein, Haiping Wu and Hongyin Tao investigate a common adverb *dou* 'all, complete'. Here the authors draw attention to the non-objective uses commonly seen in interactive discourse, including rapport-building, backgrounding for projecting perspectives, persuasion, and mitigation in (potential) conflicts. As with Wang, the authors provide pedagogical suggestions based on discourse findings, along with concrete examples.

Although this is admittedly a very small collection of work toward a meaningful integration of the different strands of theoretical and applied linguistic work in the context of Chinese as a first and second language, it is hoped that this will spark further studies that eventually lead to greater breakthroughs.

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