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Chinese: A Linguistic Introduction
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Chinese: A Linguistic Introduction, by Chaofen Sun. New York, NY, USA and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. ISBN-13: (paperback) 978-0521530828; (hard cover) 978-0521823807. Length: 248 pages.

Chinese: A Linguistic Introduction is an engaging and accessible book as well as an essential read for anyone interested in the structural and sociocultural aspects of the Chinese language. This book is especially useful for the following three reasons. First, it is intended for the general readership that does not necessarily have the background knowledge in linguistics or in Chinese language and culture. Thus the author provides a plethora of annotated examples to explain everything clearly without relying too much on linguistic terminology. Second, it touches upon important grammatical points that are essential for any course on the Chinese language. Third, the author incorporates relevant sociocultural knowledge to further engage the readers and situate linguistic examination of the Chinese language in its broader context. This book can be used by students, teachers, and researchers of the Chinese language and culture, and by linguists who want to gain some fundamental knowledge of the structure of the Chinese language.

The book contains nine chapters, along with useful tables and appendices in the front and back of the book respectively. The Introduction chapter clarifies various terms related to “China” and “Chinese,” in contrast to the non-Han languages in China and to the different varieties of spoken Chinese, i.e. the *fāngyán*.

Chapter 1 briefly outlines the major changes of the Chinese language from prehistoric times to Old Chinese, Middle Chinese, Early Modern Chinese, and eventually to the sources of Modern Standard Chinese (*Pǔtōnghuà*) in both spoken and written forms. This is followed by a description of the traditionally defined seven major dialect groups of Chinese. This chapter focuses more on the cultural backgrounds and major themes of the historical development of the Chinese language without getting into technical details.

Chapter 2 is a brief introduction to the sounds of Modern Standard Chinese. It covers topics such as syllable structure (i.e. initials and finals), rhotacization, tones and tone sandhi. The description of rhotacization is very short, probably because it is a very complicated phonological process that goes beyond the introductory level. Yet the author does give the most common rhotacized versions of the finals, e.g. [iŋ]+er → [iǎr] and [loŋ]+er → [lǎr], which represents one of the most difficult types of rhotacized finals in Chinese. It is pointed out that “the loss of the velar nasal is compensated by the nasalized vowel” (p. 39), and learners of the Chinese language might find this rule useful. With regard to 3rd tone sandhi, I find the example “Lǎo Lǐ mǎi hǎo jiǔ” very interesting. The author

explains the two-way ambiguity of this sentence, i.e. “Old Li bought good wine” and “Old Li finished buying wine”, and shows how morphology and syntax can affect the realization of successive 3rd-tone sandhi. At this point, however, because syntax and the notion of structure have not been introduced, the above-mentioned ambiguities cannot yet be analyzed via tree diagrams. If structural factors of tone sandhi are discussed in later chapters, e.g. in the chapters on syntax, it can help readers further understand the tone sandhi phenomenon in Chinese.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with morphology. Chapter 3 describes the various morphological processes in Chinese, e.g. affixation, compounding, and the aspectual markers *-le*, *-zhe*, and *-guo*. Chapter 4 focuses on reduplication and two types of particles which the author calls “clitics”, i.e. sentence-final particles, e.g. *-ne*, *-ba*, *-ma*, etc., and locative particles, e.g. *shàng* and *xià*. Towards the end of this chapter in section 4.3 titled “Beyond morphology”, the author draws on both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 to further discuss the problem with the concept of word in Chinese. The author points out in Chapter 3 that “it is not immediately clear where a Chinese word ends” (p. 47). For example, although “*chànggē*” (“to sing”) seems like a word in some sense, it can be turned into a phrase such as “*chàng-le yì-shǒu gē*” (“sang one song”). In section 4.3 here, the author uses Feng’s (1995) concept of “prosodic word” to explain why some words can be turned into phrases by using syntactic rules. Some Chinese words sound like words because they conform to the preferred prosodic pattern of di-syllabicity, i.e. being a prosodic word consisting of a binary foot. But prosodic words have access to syntactic rules, which makes them behave more like phrases. Thus the prosodic word operates between syntax and morphology, which results in the fluid boundary between words and phrases in many cases in Chinese.

Although at this point, a natural follow-up chapter would be syntax, the author chooses to discuss Chinese characters in Chapter 5, and language and culture in Chapter 6. Syntax is picked up in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8. This arrangement of topics could be a reflection of the author’s own practice in teaching. I think it is definitely helpful to introduce Chinese characters and language-culture interaction in the middle of a course in Chinese linguistics, because it might give students a break from the technicalities of linguistics, and also because most students are probably very eager to learn about the content in these two chapters. These pedagogical advantages are, however, based on the assumption that the readers and instructors go through each chapter in the order in which they are presented. But these two chapters do not really rely on contents introduced in the preceding chapters. Moreover Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 are not built on contents introduced in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 either. It seems that Chapter 5 and Chapter

6 are a little out of place. Therefore alternatively, syntax could be introduced in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, immediately following the chapters on phonology/phonetics and morphology. Then Chinese characters and the interaction between language and culture can be discussed in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8. Notwithstanding the issue with the order of chapters, I will now describe the topics introduced in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

In Chapter 5, almost everything about Chinese characters is touched upon, including what kind of writing system Chinese characters are, the development of Chinese characters, the *liùshū* categories, how to write Chinese characters stroke by stroke, radicals, how to look up Chinese characters in a dictionary, as well as pros and cons of the simplification of Chinese characters.

Chapter 6 is titled “Chinese Language and Culture.” In the first half of this chapter, the author focuses on the cultural beliefs and philosophical views as revealed in Chinese expressions. Topics include words that are related to Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, and also the “metaphors we live by”. This discussion of metaphors segues into a discussion about the differences between the concepts of “*liǎn*” and “*miànzi*”, which is very enlightening even for native speakers. This in turn leads to how politeness is conveyed in Chinese. The many examples of polite expressions, most of which are traditional formulaic phrases, can be very useful to learners of Chinese at the advanced level. The remaining section of this chapter deals with loanwords and neologism.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with syntax. Chapter 7 builds up a grammar from the lexicon up by using phrase structure rules. The underlying theoretical framework can be considered a simplified version of the Standard Theory of Generative Grammar, since no X-bar theory or later developments are presented. Essentially, the theory of syntax introduced in this book is mainly the basic structural assumptions that are commonly held across different frameworks of grammar. The remaining part of this chapter describes various types of sentences in Chinese. Chapter 8 deals with more advanced topics such as movement, relativization, and special constructions such as the BA and BEI constructions. With the technical tools developed in Chapter 7, readers are ready to analyze structurally ambiguous sentences such as “*Tā shéi dōu pà*” (i.e. “He/she fears everyone” vs. “Everyone fears him/her”) with trees and movements. At this point it would be interesting to revisit the multiple 3rd tone sandhi example mentioned earlier and see how structural differences can affect different applications of the 3rd tone sandhi rule. Chapters 7 and 8 are 72 pages long altogether, i.e. about one third of the book. These two chapters touch upon almost all of the key elements of Chinese grammar, especially some of the most difficult ones for learners of the Chinese language. These two chapters actually can be used as a stand-alone refer-

ence book of grammar, which should be very useful for both students and teachers of the Chinese language.

Outside these nine chapters, there is a table of “Major chronological divisions of Chinese history” and a table of “Major periods of the Chinese Language” in the front matter of the book. The appendices include a summary of phonetic symbols and a list of grammatical labels.

Thus *Chinese: A Linguistic Introduction* is a well-balanced book both in terms of content and technicality. Now I would like to address a few theoretical issues and make some suggestions.

First, I feel that there could have been a chapter on semantics. Especially within the most recent decade, semantics has flourished both in theoretical linguistics and in Chinese linguistics research. The author does touch upon many typical semantic issues throughout the whole book, e.g. aspects in Chapter 3 (i.e. –le, –zhe, –guo), modality in Chapter 4 (e.g. the possibility –de, and also the assumption –ba), scope and quantification in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 (e.g. negation, wh-questions, and dōu), adjectival semantics in Chapter 7, scalar presupposition in Chapter 8 (i.e. lián, cái, jiù), and semantics of noun phrases with regard to their interpretational variability in terms of specificity, kind and number. The author uses such notions of nominal semantics when the restrictions of the BA construction are discussed. Another topic that is touched upon indirectly in the book is lexical aspect or Aktionsart, e.g. verbs of states, activities, accomplishments and achievements. Such a concept of lexical aspect and its corresponding classification of verbs are very useful when it comes to the use of the perfective marker –le, and the distinction between the negation words bù and méi. In fact there are many other applications of lexical aspects that are quite useful for students of the Chinese language. Also of interest are semantic-phonology interface issues such as focus and its corresponding phonological prominence. All of these important semantic issues could very well be selectively discussed in one chapter, and it would make the discussions of certain syntactical and phonological issues easier and more approachable. The chapter on semantics can follow the chapters on syntax, since the semantics topics need to be built upon the chapters on morphology and syntax.

Second, in the discussion of Chinese tones, only the typical descriptions are given, but I feel that the discussion could be more useful if a more detailed description of tonal shapes in different environments is made available to readers. Especially for learners of the Chinese language, the 3rd tone with a contour of 214 can be easily confused with the 2nd tone with a contour of 35. Although there is still debate over whether the full 3rd tone or the half-3rd tone should be taught first to students, my own teaching experience has shown that the acquisition of the 3rd

tone is much more robust and effective if the half-3rd tone is introduced to students from the beginning, without emphasizing the full 3rd tone. Since the contour of the half-3rd tone is more distinguishable from the rising 2nd tone, highlighting the half-3rd tone could be pedagogically more effective. Given that the main readership of the book is likely Chinese language learners, it would be helpful to include a discussion on the half-3rd tone.

Third, when describing the Chinese writing system, the author uses the term “logographic”. For example, “Unlike a phonographic writing such as that of English where each letter of the alphabet encodes a phone, Chinese writing is a logographic system with each grapheme (or character) simultaneously encoding sounds and meaning at the level of the syllable.” (pp. 101-102). However as DeFrancis (1984) points out, the term “logographic” is often ‘being taken as a fancier equivalent for “ideographic”.’ (p. 147) The ideographic myth that DeFrancis (1984) tried to debunk basically assumes that Chinese characters are silent symbols that represent concepts or ideas. This is certainly not a view that is endorsed by most linguists nowadays. On the other hand, the word “logographic” means that a Chinese writing symbol represents a spoken word. Although the term “logographic” is indeed a better term, it is probably misleading to many people because they might think that the term more or less means “ideographic”. It is worth noting here the term that DeFrancis (1984) seemed to endorse is “morphosyllabic”, because ‘Only the adoption of some such term as “morphosyllabic,” which calls attention to the phonetic aspect, can contribute to dispelling the widespread misunderstanding of the nature of Chinese writing.’ (DeFrancis, 1984, p. 147). Furthermore I am not sure if it is accurate to state that “Chinese writing has the great advantage that it is not necessary for a person who knows how to decode the writing system to learn to pronounce the characters in order to read the messages written in them” (p. 102). Although the semantic component in certain phono-semantic compound characters often indeed suggests their rough semantic categories, it is nonetheless not easy to really “read the messages”. Similarly in DeFrancis’ (1984) terms, the idea that speakers of mutually unintelligible Chinese dialects can communicate by writing is also a myth that needs to be debunked. To be sure, what DeFrancis (1984) argued for is not necessarily the ultimate true answer. Essentially my suggestion here is that the debate of the nature of the Chinese writing system could be addressed more straightforwardly, and the distinctions between various terms, such as “logographic”, “ideographic”, and etc., can also be discussed.

Finally there are some minor misprints and typos. The tone mark for the 3rd tone seems to be misprinted throughout the whole book. The breve “˘” has been used in the book, while the more common diacritic is the caron or háček “ˇ”.

Also the IPA symbols for the retroflex initials (e.g. zh/ch/sh) and alveolo-palatals (i.e. j/q/x) are also misprinted as [tʂ, tʂ^h, ʂ], i.e. s with the cedilla, and [tç, tç^h, ç], i.e. c with the cedilla, on p. 36 and elsewhere in the book, while the official IPA symbols are [tʂ, tʂ^h, ʂ, tɕ, tɕ^h, ɕ]. The representation of the semantics of the perfective -le on p. 67 is inaccurately printed as in (a) below, while the more accurate version is (b), according to Smith (1994). The letter “I” represents the initial endpoint of the situation; the abbreviation “F_{arb}” refers to an arbitrary final endpoint of the situation; the slashes are the span of the viewpoint. Therefore the slashes should span the whole interval represented by “I” and “F_{arb}”, rather than going beyond the arbitrary final endpoint.

(a) Inaccurate version: (b) Accurate version (Smith, 1994, p. 115):

I F_{arb}
////////

I F_{arb}
////////

To sum it up, *Chinese: A Linguistic Introduction* does a great job of introducing the Chinese language and culture from a linguistic perspective in an approachable fashion. Just as the author states, “this then is a book written mainly for English speakers about Chinese as a foreign linguistic system” (p. 11), and it “should be of interest to students and teachers of Chinese who want to acquire a good knowledge about it in general or simply to be sophisticated learners of the language” (ibid.). Also “those who are not professionally involved in Chinese studies but, for the purposes of comparison or broadening their knowledge base, seek a general understanding of the history and linguistic structure of a major language such as Chinese” (ibid.) will definitely find this book both engaging and illuminating. The author has succeeded in all of the stated goals.

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