



Eastern Michigan University

[People & Organizations](#) ♦ [Jobs](#) ♦ [Calls & Conferences](#) ♦ [Publications](#) ♦ [Language Resources](#) ♦ [Text & Computer Tools](#) ♦ [Teaching & Learning](#) ♦ [Mailing Lists](#) ♦ [Search](#)

LINGUIST List 20.1356

Thu Apr 09 2009

Review: Sociolinguistics: Kaske (2007)

Editor for this issue: Randall Eggert <randy@linguistlist.org>

This LINGUIST List issue is a review of a book published by one of our supporting publishers, commissioned by our book review editorial staff. We welcome discussion of this book review on the list, and particularly invite the author(s) or editor(s) of this book to join in. If you are interested in reviewing a book for LINGUIST, look for the most recent posting with the subject "Reviews: AVAILABLE FOR REVIEW", and follow the instructions at the top of the message. You can also contact the book review staff directly.

Directory

1. Susan Olmstead-Wang, [The Politics of Language in Chinese Education, 1895-1919](#)

Message 1: The Politics of Language in Chinese Education, 1895-1919

Date: 09-Apr-2009

From: Susan Olmstead-Wang <solmsteadw@yahoo.com>

Subject: The Politics of Language in Chinese Education, 1895-1919



E-mail this message to a friend



Discuss this message

Announced at <http://linguistlist.org/issues/19/19-155.html>

AUTHOR: Kaske, Elisabeth

TITLE: The Politics of Language in Chinese Education, 1895-1919

SERIES: Sinica Leidensia, 82

PUBLISHER: Brill

YEAR: 2007

Susan Olmstead-Wang, University of Alabama, Birmingham.

SUMMARY

Kaske's research, originally submitted as a Ph.D. dissertation, has broad appeal to scholars of Chinese language development in particular and of language policy in general. She addresses key issues at the interface between "the sociolinguistic value system and its relation to the political landscape" (p. xviii), national identity and language use, and describes the debate between proponents of the classical and vernacular languages. Kaske situates her focus within a complex historical and political environment beginning at China's humiliating loss to Japan in 1895 and ending at the Preparatory Committee for the Unification of the National Language in 1919, where policies related to

implementing a Chinese lingua franca and educational reform were to be developed.

Kaske's detailed and extremely well documented research reflects complex issues and pressures as scholars, reformists, and the governments (late Qing dynasty and early Republic of China) struggled to understand the realities of the modernizing world and to determine the role of language and educational reform in that struggle. Kaske takes up the challenges of effectively implementing those changes, and of reaching workable compromises within a dynamic political, language, and educational system. Challenges included understanding Chinese identity in new ways and dismantling the old civil service examination system. Heavily based on Confucian moral texts written in Classical Chinese, the civil service exam dictated the entire educational curriculum and allowed for only a few privileged males to succeed. Kaske links the literary revolution of 1917 (including Hu Shi's and Chen Duxiu's efforts and the role of new vernacular magazines) to the 1919 May Fourth Movement in which educators and politically minded reformers promoted use of the vernacular, modern language planning and national educational reform. While some activists wanted to resuscitate the classical language, others sought to develop Chinese linguistics and to engage vernacular languages as vehicles for modern science and politics, including republicanism. Kaske compares and contrasts this transition to the patterns of other countries that moved from classical to vernacular languages including Japanese language reform in the post-Meiji restoration and the change from classical Latin to vernacular Italian. Kaske discusses overt government policies and covert attitudes about language as symptomatic of social and political upheaval (p. xv).

Chapter One explores relationships between politics and language in a diglossic China. The classical written language, strongly equated with Confucian texts, the civil service exam, and the pathway to power, suppressed prestige for various written vernaculars and spoken dialects. With one classical written language, and many vernacular spoken languages, diglossia suppressed the rise of written vernacular forms and of a common spoken language. Rise in vernacular publications threatened the status of the written classical language and re-defined literary functions, while proponents of a unified spoken language struggled to determine which Chinese variant would be the lingua franca. Because of inextricable relationships among language, educational, social and political reform, progress in one required change in the other.

Chapter Two considers links between general education and language, and modernizers who encouraged use of *_baihua_*, invented phonetic symbols, reformed scripts, and created literature in new vernaculars at the beginning of the 20th century. Reforming the civil service exam led to reorganizing the school systems, promoting modern teaching methods, and publishing better textbooks.

In Chapter Three, Kaske's careful research demonstrates the power of vernacular journalism at the interface between imperial and republican China and its influence on the later "*_baihuawen_* movement" (p. 162). Use of vernaculars in numerous popular journals proliferated in response to reformists' desire to push vernaculars as a pathway to change. The effort ultimately failed to engage the identity of the masses and to impress intellectuals who despised *_baihua_* as an extension of speech rather than as a full-fledged, sophisticated written language.

Chapter Four takes up language in the old Qing school system where Confucian moral teaching, presented in the classical language, was criticized as not being a "fully empowering literacy" (p. 252) able to take China into the modern age. Reformers struggled to develop a common written language suitable for a national education system. Pursued together, educational, political and language reforms extended basic literacy, educational opportunities, curriculum reform, and modern teaching methods to a broader population. In complex interplay, China's national identity and its primary symbol, the Chinese language, experienced

transformation at the same time.

In Chapter Five, Kaske explores the centrality of philology, with its focus on language history and diachronic analysis, in the debate about Chinese identity and "national essence" (p. 324). Tension arose between those who would preserve the Chinese national essence through the classical language and those who would adopt Japanese/Western definitions and categories. Language scholars vigorously debated Chinese identity and which of many varieties of pronunciation would unify and represent that identity (p. 385).

Chapter Six traces the development of a literary movement to accept a form of northern Mandarin as a compromise vernacular lingua franca, which arose in response to complex debates by activists and intellectuals. The push for language reform and policy development finally motivated the intellectual elite to take up "their responsibility for the elaboration and standardization of *_baihua_* as a modern literary language of the Chinese nation." (p. 392). The Conference for the Unification of Reading Pronunciations standardized pronunciation and created greater proximity between spoken and written languages. Kaske concludes that the literary revolution (1917) dramatically raised the status of the vernacular written language so that it became "the medium and the message of the elite discourse and scientific study" while helping to create a Chinese national language (p. 472).

EVALUATION

Kaske's detailed and persuasive text reads as a narrative while functioning as a reference book. She organizes a huge amount of original research material, draws arguments from excellent references, and analyzes complex historical and political forces comprehensively. Kaske's clear titles and headings keep the reader well oriented to nuanced arguments and dense material. Each chapter opens with pithy quotations illustrating focal points, while internal section headings and conclusions effectively organize and summarize material. Kaske's excellent academic infrastructure includes detailed footnotes and appendices drawn from Kaske's original studies. The bibliography, although labeled "selected", is extensive comprising hundreds of sources. Her combined index and glossary provides information alphabetized by English and pinyin spellings plus Chinese characters.

Although Kaske achieves her stated goals extremely well, one underlying question and one ironic point may be noted. The underlying question is how China came to blame its language for so many of its problems in modernizing and the ironic point deals with the challenge of transcribing sound into symbol and of writing in English about Chinese.

While Kaske wisely delimits the time frame for her discussion and acknowledges complex links between the Chinese language and national identity, an underlying question remains about why and how the language per se came to be seen as the main culprit, among many, for China lagging behind the West and Japan. Chapter Four demonstrates that Confucian teachings as the message and Classical Chinese as medium for that message were inextricably linked, and that the moral teachings were considered inadequate content to modernize China, but not that the language itself was deficient. Some linguists have argued for the inherent syntactical ability of the Classical Chinese language to convey sophisticated scientific material. Harbsmeier (1998) argues that a stable Chinese language was a helpful tool to access the technological advancements abundant in Chinese history. Among its scientific functions, Classical Chinese was deemed suitable to determine genus and categories and establish hierarchies within them (220), to establish argumentation and rationality (261), and to use reason and scientific explanations (269). Additionally, Classical Chinese was "not only an important medium of scientific communication... [it] was an outstanding example of rigid scientific methodology and systematic classification for natural

scientists of later ages" (408). In its rush to modernize, China seemed to have failed to take its own good scholarship into account. By deprecating the Chinese language per se and deferring to "Western types" of logic, better understood as "culture-specific logic" (Harbsmeier, p. 3), China forgot its early leadership in science and technology. Likewise, Weston (2004), while praising new approaches to literacy and to the increased "willingness to communicate to ordinary people" (p. 181), warns against throwing out Chinese tradition "in favor of a flawed Western model" (p. 207).

Kaske alludes to the Chinese breakdown of respect for itself "a breakdown of the belief in the past" but does not account for the ironic decline in a very powerful Chinese language and leadership in science (p. 470). Kaske makes clear that the Classical Chinese language became a nexus of self-loathing as China experienced its humiliating introduction to the modern world and that compromising on a lingua franca seemed essential for modernization. While Kaske summarizes various voices which favored reforming or eliminating the Chinese Classical language, these political, identity, and literacy issues are so intertwined with linguistic issues that the reader can not decide about the actual functionality of Classical Chinese. In-depth linguistic analyses should inform current debate on how to manage language change (for example, Mandarin compounding trends or developments in terminology) and educational curriculum to make Chinese best suited for modern life. To the extent that language and culture-specific logic are linked, many positive implications for China to re-discover its "own" ways of "doing" logic arise as China emerges as a scientific modern power and dominant world leader.

One ironic characteristic of the book, the lack of tone markers on romanized Chinese words, reflects the difficulty of representing spoken sounds in writing. The text employs Chinese characters (both traditional and simplified) and pinyin spellings, but no tone markers. Although Kaske (2006) notes the problem of "the wide gap between written and spoken language" (p. 224), the practice of not marking Chinese tones in the pinyin spellings in English texts serves to dis-connect spoken and written Chinese. Lack of tone markers on romanized Chinese words contributes to the confusion for readers who cannot always distinguish between homophones and near homophones from their English context. Additionally, providing tone markers in the text would assist advanced speakers/readers of Chinese as a Second Language to produce in speech key terminology acquired from reading.

Other minor problems arising from production of such a complex and detailed text in English are that some Chinese words are split incorrectly as if they were syllables in English words ("ge-ming" becomes "gem-ing", p. xi) and some English wording is overly complex and difficult to understand (see paragraph 2, p. 466). Additionally, the Index and Glossary has some organizational problems in which page numbers are out of order and not all pages listed actually have references to the topic (see the "May 4th Movement" entry).

For countries that are facing the challenges of cultivating and planning language transition (Tsao, 2000), Kaske's in-depth analysis provides historical perspective and guidance.

Whether debating among "Mandarins" (Ngiam, 2006) or "Englishes", or engaging in other language planning, language policy makers will appreciate Kaske's detailed analysis of how complex social, political and linguistic factors intersect in the modern world.

REFERENCES

Ngiam, T.D. (2006). *A Mandarin and the Making of Public Policy Reflections*. S.S.C. Tay., Ed. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.

Harbsmeier, C. (1998). *Joseph Needham Science and Civilization in China*. Vol.

7, Part I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kaske, E. (2006). "Cultural Identity, Education, and Language Politics in China and Japan, 1870-1920". In Hoyt, D.L. & Oslund, K. *The Study of Language and the Politics of Community in Global Context*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Weston, T.B. (2004). *The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, and Chinese Political Culture, 1898-1929*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tsao, F. (2000). "The Language Planning Situation in Taiwan". In Baldauf, R.E. & Kaplan, R. B., Eds. *Language Planning in Nepal, Taiwan and Sweden*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Dr. Olmstead-Wang has taught English for Specific Purposes as Coordinator of the English Language Program at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), the University of Toledo, Ohio, and the Kaohsiung Medical University, Taiwan. She currently teaches academic writing to international graduate students and second language acquisition to ESL teachers in training. She travels regularly to a Chinese medical university to assist them in converting from lecturing in Chinese to teaching in English and with problem-based learning modes.

This Year the LINGUIST List hopes to raise \$60,000. This money will go to help keep the List running by supporting all of our Student Editors for the coming year.

See below for donation instructions, and don't forget to check out our Fund Drive 2009 LINGUIST List Restaurant and join us for a delightful treat!

<http://linguistlist.org/fund-drive/2009/>

There are many ways to donate to LINGUIST!

You can donate right now using our secure credit card form at <https://linguistlist.org/donation/donate/donate1.cfm>

Alternatively you can also pledge right now and pay later. To do so, go to: <https://linguistlist.org/donation/pledge/pledge1.cfm>

For all information on donating and pledging, including information on how to donate by check, money order, or wire transfer, please visit: <http://linguistlist.org/donate.html>

The LINGUIST List is under the umbrella of Eastern Michigan University and as such can receive donations through the EMU Foundation, which is a registered 501(c) Non Profit organization. Our Federal Tax number is 38-6005986. These donations can be offset against your federal and sometimes your state tax return (U.S. tax payers only). For more information visit the IRS Web-Site, or contact your financial advisor.

Many companies also offer a gift matching program, such that they will match any gift you make to a non-profit organization. Normally this entails your contacting your human resources department and sending us a form that the EMU Foundation fills in and returns to your employer. This is generally a simple administrative procedure that doubles the value of your gift to LINGUIST, without costing you an extra penny. Please take a moment to check if your company operates such a program.

Thank you very much for your support of LINGUIST!

[Read more issues](#)|[LINGUIST home page](#)|[Top of issue](#)

[Print This Page](#)

Please **report** any bad links or misclassified data

[LINGUIST Homepage](#) | [Read LINGUIST](#) | [Contact us](#)



While the LINGUIST List makes every effort to ensure the linguistic relevance of sites listed on its pages, it cannot vouch for their contents.