

趙元任：回想我在語言上犯過的錯誤

## Where I Went Wrong in Matters of Language

By Yuen Ren Chao

Translated by George Kao

FOR A NUMBER of years I have been lecturing on the subject of language; naturally I hope what I have had to say is right in every case. But after so many years it is really difficult to think of anything new to say. So I thought, why not tell something about where I have gone wrong in matters of language? I remember not long ago my colleague and friend Martin Joos remarked: "In matters of language Chao never goes wrong." I appreciated his kind words, at the same time they made me think back to the various times that I was wrong. And this I will make the subject of my talk today.

The ancestral home of the Chao was Yanghu *hsien*, in Changchow (常州), in the province of Kiangsu. (This was the Yanghu of the "Yanghu School" of classical prose-writing, often cited along with the "Tungcheng School".) Following the Revolution of 1911, the system of having more than one *hsien* to a city was abolished and our native place became known as Wuchin *hsien*. But in everyday parlance we were all known as natives of Changchow. Ever since the days of my grandfather our family had made its home in the North. I was born in Tientsin, and was taken to Peking to live even before I had learned to talk. Later, at various times, we also lived in such places as Tz'uchow (磁州), Ch'ichow (祁州), Hochien (河間), Paoting (保定) and Chichow (冀州). In those years there were two things about my speech that did not conform to what I heard from the people around me. One was, whenever I spoke words that begin with the so-called retroflex initials *ch*, *ch'*, *sh*, *j*. I used the dental sibilants *ts*, *ts'*, *s*, *z*. Another thing was, in pronouncing all words that end in the sounds *an*, *ien*, *uan*, *üan*, I invariably dropped the final nasal sound, making them end *ã* (as in the English *at*), *ieh*, *uä*, *üeh*. One

day when I saw a cat swallowing a bowl of noodles intended for me I started yelling: *mao tz'u wote mieh*. What I wanted to say was *mao ch'ih wote mien*. ("The cat's eating my noodles!")

Sometimes my childhood speech went wrong because the grownups in our home still spoke with a trace of Changchow accent. We were supposed to speak the Peking dialect, but invariably what we Kiangsu-Chekiang people called southern accents managed to creep in. For instance, *chen*, as in *chen-chia* (true or false), and *cheng*, as in *cheng mant'ou* (to steam bread), were both pronounced *cheng* — or rather *tseng*, because I was unable to form the sound *ch* in *cheng*. Similarly, *chin*, as in *chin-t'ien* (today) and *ching*, as in *Pei-ching* (Peking), both came out *ching* in our speech. The confusing of the sounds *en* and *eng*, and of the sounds *in* and *ing*, prevailed not only in Changchow but also in an entire area of some 200-mile width along the Yangtze River valley, all the way from Shanghai to Chengtu. It was not until I reached my teens before I learned to tell these two sets of sounds apart through working painstakingly over each word.

Another place where I went wrong in my speech when young was the result of my inability to form the sound of *ni-i ni* with the tip of my tongue. I could only pronounce the *gn* sound of *ch(i)*, *ch'(i)*, *gn*, *hs* according to the old national pronunciation. In French the two sounds *ni* and *gni* exist side by side, such as the *ni* in *venir*, formed with the tongue-tip, and the *gnie* in *compagnie*, formed with the surface of the tongue. In China, Hangchow is probably the only place where people use the tongue-tip sound to pronounce the word *ni* (you) and to use the surface of the tongue to pronounce the word *ni* (to draft, to plan). My surmise is this was due to the influence

of northern speech brought there during the Southern Sung period. The distinction, of course, is a fine one. I have even known the case of a chairman of an Oriental Languages Department in a certain American university, a native of the southern part of Hopei Province, who pronounced such words as *ni* (you), *niu* (cattle), and *nien* (year) with the surface of the tongue. We natives of Changchow were also frustrated when we tried to pronounce any *ju-sheng* (fifth-tone) characters the Northern way, which has no fifth tone. There was no problem with everyday words. For instance, in counting up to ten — *i*, *erh*, *san*, *ssü*, *wu*, *liu*, *ch'i*, *pa*, *chiu*, *shih* — it so happens that half of the words are of the fifth tone. We could easily convert *i* (one), *ch'i* (seven) and *pa* (eight) into the first tone, *shih* (ten) into the second tone, and *liu* (six) into the fourth tone. But the less frequently used words gave us a lot of trouble. Since we were not long-time residents of the National Capital district, we distributed our fifth tones in many ways differently from the Pekinese. For instance, the *pi*<sup>4</sup> in *pu*<sup>2</sup>-*pi*<sup>4</sup> (not necessary) we pronounced *pu*<sup>4</sup>-*pi*<sup>3</sup>. Words encountered in a literary text caused even greater difficulty. We could say the name of the insect *ch'ü-ch'ü-erh* (cricket) without any trouble, but when we saw the literary expression *hsi*<sup>1</sup>-*shuo*<sup>4</sup> in writing we simply gave it the fifth tone according to the Changchow dialect and said *si*<sup>5</sup>-*se*<sup>5</sup>. The fact is, ever since I started learning the characters as a child I had used the Changchow tones throughout. Not just fifth-tone characters, but many others I did not know how to read aloud according to the Northern tones. That was why, when I was young, my speech was a very impure Hopei dialect, mixed with many Kiangsu-Chekiang accents. Of course, strictly speaking, there is no language, and no dialect, in the world that does not have very heterogenous origins. Linguistically speaking, there is no such thing as right or wrong. Still, so far as we children were under the impression that we were speaking the Peking dialect, that was a wrong assumption.

One other mistaken idea that I had was that, in person-to-person communication, once the language used has settled into a pattern it is not subject to change. Take, for instance, the so-called minority groups in the United States — whether Chinese, Japanese, Jews, or Swedes. Invariably the native tongue is used at home. But after the

children have gone to school and have quickly learned English, they come home and speak English to their parents, while the growups stick to their native tongue. Thus, a fixed pattern of person-to-person communication is established between the generations. In my own experience, I had spoken the Northern dialect from childhood. When I was nine and moved back to Changchow with my family, I found that from Great Grandfather down three branches of the family, including various relatives of the older generation and of my own generation, lived under the same roof, in a huge house of three or four inner courts. My relatives spoke to me in the Changchow dialect, to which I could only respond in the Northern tongue. It was not long before I learned to speak Changchow from the servants, from the people on the streets, and from other children. However, to my elders the situation persisted where they spoke in Changchow and I responded in the Northern dialect. Somehow I felt that it would be disrespectful on my part to change around and speak to them in the Changchow patois. Of course, it wasn't wrong for me to maintain this pattern of communication, though I was certainly mistaken in having thought that there was anything *de rigueur* about it simply because I was talking to my elders.

AS THE YEARS went by, I fell into another error, or rather inconsistency, in never being able to make up my mind whether to be a linguist, capable of handling many languages and dialects as well as the native speakers, or to become a theorist in the science of linguistics. In my youth I had been exposed to a great number of dialects and had always wanted to be proficient in the speech of all of China's provinces. Later, as a student of phonetics and linguistics, I was a great admirer of the English scholar Daniel Jones and the American scholar Edward Sapir. They both were fluent in many languages, at the same time they were linguistic theorists of the first rank. I remember the first time I went to New Heaven to call on Sapir. Having found out from me the phonetic system of the Changchow dialect, a little about its grammar and a few words of everyday usage, within an hour he started conversing with me in Changchow. Another time, I studied under Antoine Meillet, the well-known editor of *Les Langues du Monde*, at the University of Paris. Whenever he cited any example from a foreign

language — be it Greek or Latin, a Near Eastern language or a Far Eastern language — what came out was always pure French pronunciation. The theories he expounded were all clear and sound, so why bother to ape the tones of the native speaker? Another one of my professors was J. Vendryès. He was born in the eastern part of France where people did not follow standard French in making a distinction between the front [a] and the back [ɑ]. Our French teacher usually tells us that the word *patte* (claw) employs the front [a], while in *pâte* (paste) it is the back [ɑ]. The objective case for the pronoun “I” is *moi*, and the month of the year is *mois*. In both cases my teacher Vendryès made no distinction between the front and the back, simply pronouncing the words [pAt] and [mwA]. Nevertheless, here was a recognized authority whose treatise on linguistics, *Le Langage*, was a standard text.

~~~~~  
 This article is translated from a radio script which Dr. Chao wrote and recorded in May 1972 for broadcast by the Chinese-language service of the Voice of America. Another article written in English and entitled “Where Chao Went Wrong in Matters of Language” was published in the Martin Joos Commemorative Volume of the Canadian Journal of Linguistics (1972). The substance of both articles originally appeared in 我的語言自傳 (“My Linguistic Autobiography”) in the Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica (1971). Although these articles are essential similar in content, the present version is somewhat more informal in presentation and richer in autobiographical detail.

Yuen Ren Chao (Y. R. Chao) is Agassiz Professor of Oriental Languages and Literature Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. A pioneer in Chinese phonology, he made the first systematic recordings of the major dialects in China. Dr. Chao's books, covering a wide range of linguistic topics, include *Cantonese Primer and Mandarin Primer*, published by Harvard, 1947-48; *語言問題* (“Problems in Linguistics”), Taiwan, 1960; *A Grammar of Spoken Chinese*, California, 1965; *Language and Symbolic Systems*, Cambridge, 1968; and *Readings in Sayable Chinese*, 1969. He also translated *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass into Chinese*.

I have often boasted that I could speak all of the major Chinese dialects. But one time when I was at the railway station in Chaochow trying to purchase a second-class ticket to Swatow, what I got was two third-class tickets. I then had to resort to the Cantonese dialect to make myself understood. I have made speeches in French while in France and in German while in Germany. Fortified with this self-confidence, once when I stopped at a hotel in Mexico City I telephoned room service to send up some breakfast, placing my order in Spanish. After five minutes or so, room service telephoned me back in English with the question — “What was that you just ordered for breakfast?” Another time I was travelling in Sweden and tried to get a ticket for the city of M-a-l-m-o, with two dots over the letter o. I repeated the word *Malmö*, *Malmö* a number of times without anyone comprehending what I was trying to say. Finally it dawned on someone and he exclaimed: “Oh, you want to go to Malmö,” pronouncing the syllables as though using the Chinese fourth tone or *ch'ü Sheng*, followed by the second tone or *yang-p'ing*. I had known that Swedish, like Chinese, is a tonal language, but at the moment I forgot to apply this bit of theoretical knowledge to a practical situation.

During a period of twenty-odd years from the 1910's to the 1930's I spent much time carrying on side by side my work for a unified Chinese national language and my survey of the Chinese dialects. I soon discovered that my dual role was the cause of considerable misunderstanding. When I was on field trips in the various provinces conducting dialect survey for the Institute of History and Philology of the Academia Sinica, some of my informants laboured under the impression that I was a representative of the Ministry of Education, there to investigate the progress of the National Language Movement. As a result, instead of speaking to me in their pure local tongue, they made valiant attempts to carry on a conversation in “fractured Mandarin”. This happened so frequently that wherever I went I was obliged to bone up on the local dialect and make a half-baked attempt to use it when talking with my informants so that they could speak their native tongue without any misgivings. This experience led me to abandon my onetime erroneous conception that the dialectician's job is only listening and

analyzing a certain dialect, and not trying to learn to speak it.

When it comes to the teaching of languages, I have always felt that the method I adopted, stressing listening and reading out loud, was the right one. In this I was not influenced by the new *audio-lingual approach* so popular since the Second World War. My method was actually based on a habit developed since I was a child studying the classics in the old-fashioned family school — that is, the methods described in T'ao Yuan-ming's essay "Mr. Five-Willows" as "reading a book without aiming at understanding it all". As one grows older one naturally gains in understanding of what he has read. This truth is exemplified in another saying — "When you have read the Three Hundred T'ang Poems through and through you become a poet in spite of yourself." I still remember the time when I was a student in Second-year German at Cornell University. The teacher was a native German but he followed the pedagogy prevailing at the time and conducted his class by simply translating a German text into English sentence by sentence. In the course of an entire semester we students were exposed to no more than twenty sentences of spoken German. But when I did my home work I followed my old habit of reading out loud, hollering the German syllables so that I could hear how they sounded. When it came time for the final examination I got an "A" in German-English translation.

However, if I should conclude from this type of experience that the audio-lingual approach was the only method of learning languages, I would be again mistaken. This I realized when I first became acquainted with the young lady who was to be my wife. She had been a student for three years at McTyeire's School in Shanghai. But her ancestral home was in Anhwei Province, and she was born in Nanking and had studied previously in Hupei. So during her student days in Shanghai she spoke a kind of southern Mandarin with her schoolmates, without having attempted a single sentence in the Shanghai dialect. After we were married we played a game of "dialects", switching from the Nanking dialect one day to the Yangchow dialect another day, to the Hupei dialect still another day. As we switched from one dialect to another, all of a sudden out came her "Shanghaiese", spoken fluently as though she had been using it all the

time. It dawned on me then that, although the audio-lingual approach is a good one, it is quite possible to learn a language through listening alone.

For a while, in our emphasis on the audio-lingual method of instruction, we neglected reading comprehension, especially the study of Chinese characters. During the years 1943-44, I served as head of the Chinese department in the ASTP (Army Special Training Program) at Harvard University. Because it was an intensive course and the graduates were immediately sent overseas, our emphasis was on spoken Chinese by means of romanized transliterations. There wasn't much time for Chinese characters, except for the last couple of months in the course when the students were taught a few of the most commonly used characters and even a bit of Cantonese. At the end of the ten-month program, these American boys were quite fluent in spoken Chinese, many of them later went on to China and some even married Chinese wives. However, among the students there were a few who showed a special interest in written Chinese and made an effort to acquire additional Chinese characters on their own. Their instructors were glad to help them learn more Chinese characters. Soon afterwards, they even started a Chinese paper which they called *Ta Ssü Pao* (The Great Private) — being a parody of the well-known Chinese newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* (The Great Public). Since each of the students had enlisted as a *private* (a word that may be rendered *ssü*), it follows that a paper written and edited by privates should be named *Ta Ssü Pao*! I wouldn't be surprised that that was the only Chinese-language paper edited entirely by foreigners in all the history of journalism. I recall this story simply to emphasize the fact that these students who published the newspaper not only learned more Chinese characters but also demonstrated greater proficiency in spoken Chinese. From this we might say that, in addition to the aural-oral approach, there is an aural-oral-visual approach capable of even greater efficacy — something I had not quite expected before.

I HAD LONG laboured under another illusion in matters of language, and that was an idea that language distributions somehow followed geographical and political boundaries. Of course I knew

that the Wu dialect is spoken in the southeastern part of Kiangsu, while southern Mandarin is spoken in the southwestern part of the province, and northern Mandarin in the northern part. Still, one year, when I was travelling in Europe I unconsciously made the assumption that a different language was spoken in each country, or each region. We were motoring in Switzerland and stopped overnight in the town of Brig at the foot of the Matterhorn. I had planned on sending the car to a local garage to have the engine inspected and lubricated and such and, because Brig is in the German-speaking area of Switzerland, I took care to look up in my pocket dictionary the Germany names for the various parts of a motor engine. When I took the car to the garage in the morning, the mechanic, seeing we were tourists, immediately addressed us in French. This would never do, said I. I had done my homework in German last night, and this car has got to be serviced in German. I had been forewarned that Swiss German is somewhat different from standard German, but I was not prepared for the fact that the local people conversed with foreigners in French.

On that same trip we drove up the northwestern coast of the Continent to Denmark. In France and Belgium the natives speak to their visitors in French. The people of Holland, knowing that few among the foreigners are conversant in Dutch, address them mostly in English. In Germany, the Germans speak to you in the so-called High German (*hochdeutsch*), which is the German that most foreigners learn to speak. When you travel in the northern European countries you find people speaking to you in English, again because they expect very few foreigners to know their languages. However, everywhere in our travels I tried to listen very carefully to what the natives spoke among themselves, and that was a totally different matter. Starting from the northeastern

part of France, people speak a Germanic language called *Flemish*. In Belgium, of course, Flemish is one of the two national languages. As we proceeded on our journey, this gradually became Dutch and then, by degrees, Dutch evolved into Low German (*Platdeutsch*), spoken in the various coastal regions. The shift from Low German into the Danish tongue was also a gradual one. All in all, I got the impression on this trip as though we were on a Yangtze River steamer going from Shanghai to Chungking: at each stop along the way we would find a different dialect spoken; it was very hard to tell where one dialect left off and another began.

I have cited many instances where I went wrong in matters of language. Now I want to tell about the time when I made a mistake by being too correct. I am fond of a red wine known in English as *Burgundy*. But I wasn't too sure where Burgundy was located — what city or province it might be and in what country. After we drove from Switzerland into French territory we stopped in *Dijon*, the capital city of the province of *Bourgogne*. When we walked into a hotel we noticed many people standing around a barrel in the lobby and drinking glass after glass from it. I didn't pay much attention to this and pretty soon we went out to eat at a restaurant. We had my favourite red wine for dinner, which was of course billed separately. When we got back to the hotel I discovered that what the people were drinking from that barrel was this very same *Burgundy* wine. It was served free, gratis, and on the house. It turned out that Dijon is the capital city of the wine-producing *Burgundy* region. I had only known the province by its French name *Bourgogne*, without knowing that *Bourgogne* is none other than my old English friend Burgundy. For just this once, my knowledge of French did not serve me well in France!

(For Chinese text see page 128)

*The Last Word on 'Chaos'*

There are translations and translations. Whenever a sentence of this type is heard by Bertrand Russell, he will almost invariably remark dryly: "Then there must be at least four translations." Now how would you translate the sentence "There are translations and translations" into a language that has no distinction between the singular and plural forms of nouns, or for that matter into a language that has a dual number in addition to singular and plural forms? The answer is, you cannot. If you try to translate it word for word, or even if you smooth out the grammar, to infer from it that there are at least four translations would then be completely *non sequitur*. I cite this example in order to show that translation is such a multidimensional affair that for any given material there are not only four translations, but usually many more than four translations according to the relative importance to be assigned to various dimensions.

– YUEN REN CHAO

"Dimensions of Fidelity in Translation  
with Special Reference to Chinese"  
*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*  
1969.

We had an official interpreter assigned to look after us. His English was very good and he was especially proud of his ability to make puns in English. His name was Mr. [Y. R.] Chao and, when I showed him an article that I had written called "Causes of the Present Chaos," he remarked, "Well, I suppose, the causes of the present Chaos are the previous Chaos." I became a close friend of his in the course of our journeys. . . .

– BERTRAND RUSSELL

On his visit to China in 1920.  
*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell,*  
1914-1944.

(The title of this book) came about this way: First of all, when Russell was in China he gave a lecture entitled "Causes of the Present Chaos in China", with me as the interpreter. After he returned to England, when our first child was born we wrote and informed him of it. In reply he wrote: "*Congratulations, so you are among the causes of the present Chaos in China!*" Later, in his autobiography (volume II, p. 127) he said that Chao Yuen Ren was fond of punning, which I admit. But he attributed this pun to me, while it was he himself who had played on the word *Chaos*. . . ."

– YUEN REN CHAO

From the preface to *Tsa-chi Chao-chia*  
(Family of Chaos) by Buwei Yang Chao  
(Mrs. Y. R. Chao), 1972.