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Multidisciplinary Perspectives**

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LACUS FORUM XXXVII

**COMMUNICATION AND COGNITION:
MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES**

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VI



Diglossia
& Second
Language
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WRITTEN LANGUAGE AS PRECURSOR TO DIGLOSSIA: A CASE STUDY OF *WU*

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Abstract. In a community in which two languages are spoken, the relationship between the two languages may be either temporary, in which one language may be lost in a short time, or it may last over several generations. Either of these relationships may be considered to be bilingual. However Fishman uses bilingual to describe the situations of individuals, while a long-term coexistence in which both languages receive recognition in the society is referred to as diglossia. This paper will look at the Wu language spoken in East China in and around Shanghai, and how the use of this language is not consistent with Fishman's use of diglossia. Specifically it will address the lack of written standardization of the Wu dialects and historical attempts to create a written form of the modern language, as well as modern equivalents.

Keywords: Wu, Shanghai, Suzhou, Diglossia, Writing, Standardization

Languages: Wu, Mandarin, Cantonese, Latin

WHEN TWO LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN IN THE SAME COMMUNITY, the situation can be either unstable and thus temporary, or stable, lasting over several generations; the two languages and the manner in which speakers use them are “continuous variables, matters of degree” (Fishman 1989:185). While the term bilingualism can refer to either situation, Fishman uses it to describe the language situations of individuals, with diglossia referring to a situation that has a longer-term stability and is societally-rooted.

With around 90 million speakers, the Wu language of East China is second to Mandarin in number of native speakers. In Mainland China there is significant social and economic pressure to speak Mandarin and abandon one's local dialect. In many cases this means adults speak Mandarin to their children while speaking their local language or dialect to each other. Yet a recent rise in regional pride has resulted in pressure from Wu speakers for a more public presence for the language, even among younger speakers. Gibbons & Ramirez (2004:4) explain that “minority-language maintenance is, in effect, an attempt to resist the cultural power of languages that are spoken by a majority of the population, and/or languages that are, for some reason, socially dominant.” Television and radio programs in Wu are on the rise, and Wu has found a wide audience in the form of stand-up comedian Zhou Libo, who uses the Shanghai Wu dialect as a major part of his act. Despite the strong presence of Mandarin in Shanghai, in part due to the high percentage of residents from other parts of China, many neighborhoods still operate almost exclusively in Wu for much of the

day-to-day business. In some cities, even Western establishments like McDonald's require all employees to be fluent in the local Wu dialect.

Wu speakers - out of economic necessity and political pressure - are typically bilingual, with Mandarin as their second language. The language contact situation is what Fishman (1989) would characterize as bilingualism without diglossia. Spoken in Shanghai, southern Jiangsu province and much of Zhejiang province, Wu has upwards of a dozen distinct dialects with various degrees of mutual intelligibility. There have been no broad efforts towards standardization of the written language in the modern era. In the early 1900's, with the intent to increase literacy for the purpose of reading religious texts, the Moka Garden Embroidery Mission in the city of Suzhou adapted a primarily Taiwanese system of phonetic transcription, colloquially known as bopomofo, and used this to create teaching materials in regional dialects, including dialect versions of the Lord's Prayer (Burkhead 1920). As in other Chinese languages, Chinese characters are typically used in modern times, but to inadequate effect, as character selection varies greatly between dialects and even person-to-person.

This paper will discuss the merits and difficulties in using different systems for writing Wu using either bopomofo or any of the more modern pinyin-derived systems found in most learning resources. It will further consider the importance of establishing a written standard in order for the Wu language to progress from its current language contact situation with Mandarin, bilingualism without diglossia, into a situation of more equal footing: bilingualism with diglossia where "the perceived ethnocultural legitimacy" and "normative functional complementarity" (Fishman 1989:191) is at minimum regionally intact, akin to the status of Catalan in Spain or French in Canada. Then it will address some of the possible causes of the current situation of bilingualism without diglossia. Finally, I outline my plans for further research on the topic of written forms of Wu in order to make a prediction regarding the future of the language.

1. HISTORICAL USE OF BOPOMOFO. In the 1920s a Protestant mission called the Moka Garden Embroidery Mission based in Suzhou¹ published a handful of learning materials for teaching the local residents how to read. At this time a system of phonetic transcription known as zhùyīn fúhào (注音符号, 'phonetic notation signs'), more colloquially referred to as bopomofo, was in use. Written with fewer than 40 glyphs, bopomofo provides an alternative system easier to learn than the more complex Sinitic characters. In this system words are written with anywhere from one to three glyphs, the first representing the initial consonant and the rest covering the final vowel monophthongs or diphthongs. bopomofo glyphs often consist of no more than one or two strokes and are based on Sinitic characters, providing a simpler yet still familiar alternative to characters.

Though initially created to transcribe Mandarin, the national language, bopomofo was later adapted by the Moka Mission to the dialects of Wu spoken in the areas in

¹ The Moka Mission also published texts from their branches in Shanghai and neighboring Changzhou, using the local dialects spoken in those places.

which they were active. This trend continued into the 1930s, during which time books were published on the phonetics of the Changzhou dialect (Fang 1931) and neighboring Suzhou (Lu & Fang 1931). This required the creation of new glyphs to cover semi-voiced consonants that are characteristic of Wu yet absent in Mandarin. Many of these later additions were not widely used outside of the Moka texts and therefore never made it into modern computer encoding systems. While some involved simply adding a diacritic to denote aspiration or a change in voicing, others were entirely new glyphs. The result was a system that would have been easy to learn, especially given the similarity to an otherwise known system, but also a system that covered the phonemes found in Wu that are absent in Mandarin. In fact the ease of this system is praised in an introduction to one of these books published by the Moka Garden Embroidery Mission. In the introduction the author writes that the “lessons have been successfully taught to several hundred people,” a testament to its apparent ease (Burkhead 1920:21).

However, after the founding of the People’s Republic of China and the Communists’ subsequent control of the mainland, bopomofo was largely forgotten outside of Taiwan. It can be found today in some older dictionaries, such as (Mathews 1960). bopomofo can still be seen in Taiwan; however, as of 2009 the only official transcription system in use is the pinyin system, and since then the use of bopomofo has been slowly diminishing. One could argue that bopomofo is even better suited to Wu than Mandarin, as Wu has a greater range of possible syllables, and thus less homophony than that found in Mandarin. Due to a great degree of difference in pronunciation and indeed vocabulary between even neighboring dialects of Wu, the use of bopomofo by the Moka Mission served only as a transcription of regional dialects and not in any way as standardization of written Wu. Though bopomofo may have been useful at one point for writing Wu, the simple lack of any widespread understanding of the system, as well as the lack of support in modern encoding systems such as Unicode, makes it an unlikely candidate for the written language today. What we often find instead is Wu written in the way that people in China are most used to writing, that is, with Sinitic characters.

2. WRITING WU WITH CHARACTERS. It is only within the last century that written vernacular Chinese has become widespread. Before then, the written language was what is known as Literary or Classical Chinese (文言文, wényán wén). This created a situation that could be considered analogous to the use of Classical Latin as the formal language of the Roman Empire, while Vulgar Latin, with the many regional variants that ultimately became the Romance languages, was the language of daily life.

One of the earliest widely distributed texts written in the vernacular of the region, that is, a Wu dialect, was the novel *Hǎishàng Huā Lièchuán* (海上花列傳), published in 1892 and written by Hǎn Bāngqìng (韓邦庆). It was titled “The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai” in the English translation. Set in Shanghai and written in both classical Chinese and the dialect of nearby Suzhou,² the novel has since been trans-

² The dialect of Suzhou was at that time the prestige dialect of Wu.

lated into Mandarin (Zhang 1995) and then from Mandarin into English. At the time that “The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai” was first published, use of the vernacular in writing was just beginning. In addition to writing with sentence structure found in the spoken language, which by that time had greatly diverged from the style upon which the classical writing was based, writers would also often resort to alternative characters (2009). These were often still classical forms, as in the use of 吾 (wú) in place of 我 (wǒ) for the first person pronoun, which is pronounced /ɲu/ in the Shanghai dialect. This was often done, and still is, to distinguish the sentence from a possible Mandarin equivalent. In other cases new characters were created in order to cover the both sound and meaning of a word that existed in Wu but was missing in Mandarin or Literary Chinese. In most cases, these were simply phonetic contractions and not without precedent.

There are, in fact, plenty of historical contractions in Literary Chinese. Many of these are outlined by E. W. Pulleyblank in his *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*. Pulleyblank (1991:108) argues that the character 勿 (wù), a means of negation and common in modern signage admonishing people to not smoke in-doors or to walk on the grass, was originally a contraction of 毋 (wú ‘not, no’) and 之 (zhī [possessive marker]).

Often, the contracted characters created for writing dialects are more visually representative. For example in modern Northern dialects of Mandarin we find 甬 (béng [a contraction of 不用 (bù yòng ‘[do] not use’]). In Wu and Cantonese the equivalent is 甬 (fiòng), using 勿 (wù) in place of 不 (bù), as is common in southern topolects. Common in Wu and appearing in “The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai” is the contraction of 勿要 (wù yào ‘not want’), written 勳 and pronounced fiào.

Another common method of writing Wu that distinguishes it from Mandarin (see above) is the use of replacement characters. This sometimes reflects contractions, such as 这样 (zhèyàng) being written 酱 (jiàng) in many modern Mandarin communications on the Internet, despite the fact that the latter means ‘sauce’ and the former means ‘like this’. However, more often one may find complete syllable-for-syllable replacements where the original meaning of the substituted character is completely disregarded, leaving only the sound as having importance. This is also found in typed Mandarin conversations and is common in SMS communications typed on mobile phones. Homophones are used in place of the more standard character based on the convenience of the input method. However in Wu conversations this is more often a pun or shibboleth, whereas in Mandarin SMS communications it may often be a result of laziness.

An exception to this informal use of replacement characters can be found in the 1889 text, *A Syllabic Dictionary of the Chinese Language* published by the American Presbyterian Press and credited to S. Wells Williams. In it, sample texts are given first in standard written Mandarin. Then, parallel columns provide the same text in the vernacular of different areas, including Beijing, Hankou, Shanghai and Ningbo. In the latter two, both Wu dialects, the possessive marker 之 (zhī), replaced by 的 (de)

in Modern Standard Mandarin, is written 个 (ge). The 个 (ge) character is otherwise found in Mandarin in simplified form in 個, a generic measure word. This particular replacement is quite common in casual written Wu. The Mandarin equivalent, 的 (de), is not cognate with it (Williams 1889).

3. WU ROMANIZATION. One somewhat common way of writing Wu that has not yet been mentioned is with the International Phonetic Alphabet. 外国人学上海话 (wàiguó rén xué shànghǎi huà ‘Shanghai Dialect for Foreigners’) by Xú Ziliàng (徐子亮) is one example that can be found at most large bookstores in Shanghai today. Qián Nǎiróng (钱乃容), current head of the Chinese Language and Literature department at Shanghai University, has published a number of texts on the language, including two dictionaries, one based entirely on IPA and the other using a modified pinyin for the same content. Qián Nǎiróng, in his “Shanghainese Grammar” (上海话语法, shànghǎi huà yǔfǎ) as well as in his History of the Development of the Shanghai Dialect (上海语言发展史, Shànghǎi yǔyán fāzhǎnshǐ) makes regular use of IPA in order to give accurate accounts of pronunciation (Qian 2003).

Unfortunately, at least for the sake of consistency in recording the language, IPA is not the primary method of writing Wu for language learning texts. Variations on the pinyin system used for writing Mandarin are often more common. In his handbook on the Suzhou dialect of Wu (标准苏州音手册, biāozhǔn sūzhōu yīn shǒucè), Wàng Píng (汪平) uses IPA in the first few pages, where he provides a key to his own Romanization system,³ which is then used throughout the remainder of the book (Wang 2007). Still others provide their own systems. Two popular books available in many Shanghai bookstores - “Self Study of Shanghainese” (自学上海话, zìxué shànghǎi huà) and Survival Shanghainese Phrasebook (临时急需一句话: 上海话, línshí jí xū yī jù huà: shànghǎi huà) - along with many other sentence-based texts, rely heavily on replacement characters. The primary audience for these books is Mandarin speakers, for whom the characters provide an easily remembered guide to pronunciation. For example the first person pronoun, written 我 or 吾 and pronounced /ŋu/, is given in the latter text with 嗯—无(ng—wu) as a close approximation; however the text offers little in terms of phonetic accuracy (Tang & Zhang 2003).

Though many young educated Mandarin speakers are quite familiar with IPA, as this is the primary method of transcribing pronunciation in English textbooks and bilingual dictionaries, IPA is not nearly as common in Shanghainese books as modified pinyin or replacement characters. Rarer still are books such as Lonely Planet’s China phrasebook, which includes a section on Shanghainese in which only cognates or more common Mandarin equivalents are used, regardless of the pronunciation. An example of this is the Mandarin phrase *xiao xin* (小心, ‘be careful’), for which the Shanghainese equivalent is given as *dūng shing*, which would more accurately correspond to the characters 当心 (*dāng xīn*) and having the same approximate meaning

³ Admittedly, none of these systems is particularly confusing. As with Cantonese, glottal stops are represented by k/g or t/d. It is more an issue for the reader that the Mandarin pronunciation be avoided, as much of these non-IPA systems rely on pinyin syllables which do not reflect the pinyin pronunciation.

(175). While this may be of some use to those who have previously learned Mandarin, the lack of clarity in meaning for the characters and lack of phonetic accuracy make it a largely inadequate system for serious learners.

4. CAUSES OF THE CURRENT STATE OF WU. As mentioned in the introduction, Fishman describes diglossia as a stable bilingualism at a societal level. It is my belief that the political conditions in Shanghai which have led to the lack of a written language are the primary reason for the status of Wu today. Specifically, it is the influence on the city from the government of the People's Republic of China in terms of language policy that has had the greatest impact on Wu. In contrast to this, the situation in Hong Kong with the history of control by the British who had a fairly hands-off approach to language use among the general public, as well as the "one country, two systems" policy of the Chinese government since the handover, has left the use of Cantonese in Hong Kong more or less intact to the present day. One must also take into account the decision regarding which language to use that was made by authors in the time that the vernacular first became widely used for written works.

To get a better understanding of the discrepancy between the situation with Cantonese and that of Wu, it is useful to look at the political situation of those two cities from vantage point of the last hundred and fifty years. Cantonese is largely developed and is accepted as a legitimate though unofficial dialect/language. Wu has been almost entirely neglected, save for a few specialized researchers.

In the case of Hong Kong, British rule lasted until 1997, at which point it was handed back to the People's Republic of China. Still, the city was permitted to maintain much of its autonomy. In Shanghai, foreign control of the city was less pervasive than it was in the colonial areas, and even that form of extraterritoriality ended around the end of the Second World War. I argue, since there were sections of town which were treated as separate from China and policed by the occupying forces, that this form of control is relevant to the language situation today.

In Hong Kong the local community was largely left to its own devices, with English as the primary language of governance. To some extent this is still the case. In Shanghai, on the other hand, when the Communists took over after World War II, the populace was subjected to the efforts of the government to spread Mandarin as the official State language. That, in addition to the greater emigration of Cantonese speakers to the rest of the world, has created a much greater awareness of Cantonese as a language of China in comparison to any awareness of Wu.

What's more, when people began to write in the vernacular in the last century, a choice was made by authors, many of whom were from Shanghai and the surrounding Wu speaking areas, to use Mandarin to write vernacular texts. In doing so, a number of words and characters were brought into Mandarin from Wu. One such character is that for *ràng* 'to allow', which was 讓 in the traditional form and 让 in the simplified, using the 上 (*shàng*) character for the phonetic.⁴ This specific instance of simplification borrowed a local Wu shorthand character based on the pronunciation

⁴ See Norman 1988 for further details on this simplification.

of the word in the Suzhou dialect of Wu at the time (Norman 1988). Specifically it was the literary reading of the character (Wang 2007), for which 上 and 𠂔 were both pronounced sā. (Wang 2007)

As a result of this decision to use Mandarin, there haven't been any major publications using Wu since the time of "The Sing Song Girls of Shanghai". Where does this leave us regarding the future of the written forms of Wu? For that we ought to look at the Internet.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH PLANS. The most likely place to find written Wu, specifically the Shanghainese dialect, is on a bulletin board system known as KDS, from the Chinese 宽带山 (kuāndài shān) 'broadband mountain'. The site, 021kds.com, is known throughout the Chinese-language Internet as the main online hangout for young Shanghainese. The conversations are heavily loaded with local slang, ranging from regularly used variations found in the Shanghai dialects of Wu and Mandarin to odd replacements of characters and even instances of what's been called huǒxīng huà (火星话, 'Martian language').⁵

Beyond general conversations and gossip, there has been a recent trend in China where stories originally written for blogs and online message boards are published commercially. Bloggers are made into novelists often enough that it's become a goal for many people, just as in the West we have YouTube stars signing recording contracts with major record labels. If this trend continues in China, it will be these message boards and corresponding blogs from which the stories will be taken. For that reason we may accept that the culture of the online communities would have a great influence on the ways in which the texts would be written.

A follow-up paper will be looking closely at just that. Using the KDS message boards, it will address specific instances of replacement characters or written variations. More specifically, it will be looking at the possible replacements for particular words, and from that calculating the likelihood of one being used over the rest. It may be that a certain character, common in both Wu and Mandarin, is for one reason or another written with a variant character.⁶ I will be gathering a large collection of conversations posted on the KDS boards and from those conversations, with the help of native speakers, attempt to form a clear picture of what form the written language has taken in this context and thus determine where it is likely to go.

It is difficult to say whether Wu will have much of a future. On the one hand, with 90 million speakers it seems unlikely to disappear. On the other hand, in apparently lacking any standard written form and by being under great pressure from a government that prefers another language, it is hard to see how it can survive past the next

⁵ This involves breaking individual characters down into component parts so that 奇 (jī 'odd') may be written as 木可 (mù kě 'wood / be able'). The main purpose, aside from self-expression, seems to be to avoid automated censorship.

⁶ As a hypothetical example, if 奇 (jī 'odd') were consistently written as 柯 (kē), with the locations of its component parts changed. This has been seen in some cases with other characters, again possibly to avoid censorship.

couple of generations. Already many Shanghainese children are being raised without Wu. It is my hope, with this further research, to be able to point to a system capable of supporting diglossia, were the political situation to change in such a way as to permit it.

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