

Contemporary Chinese Thought

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Relationship Between Language and Philosophy

Guest Editor and Translator:

Katia Chirkova
Leiden University

M.E. Sharpe

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Guest Editor's Introduction

Interest in language as a key method of philosophical research has inspired many twentieth-century philosophers, including Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida. In the course of the century, this attention to language and linguistics gradually grew into a systematic study of natural and artificial languages, which formed an independent branch of philosophy now known as the “philosophy of language.” The main aims of the philosophy of language are to determine what language is, and to dispel philosophical problems by means of language analysis. This turn of philosophical attention to language-related problems, also known as the Linguistic Turn, brought about the naissance and development of analytic philosophy and hermeneutics, each of which focuses on fundamental issues concerning the connections between language, mind, and the world, as well as the nature of meaning and truth.

Important factors to enhance the development of language research in philosophy were the birth of formal logic and the careful application of mathematical methods to the study of meaning. Thus, fundamental philosophical questions in the philosophy of language are nowadays investigated through a meticulous logical analysis of key philosophical words and their usage.

Despite the fact that it had already been blossoming in the West for more than a century, and that it was equipped with increasingly sophisticated and efficient research methods, the philosophy of language was not introduced into China until recently. Although some language-related discussions—especially those concerned with the connections between words and their meanings—can be traced back to the very origins of classical Chinese philosophy, there has been hardly any persistent research into the nature of language throughout the history of Chinese thought. The development of the philosophy of language in twentieth-century Western philosophy had no considerable impact on philosophical research in China, either. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed the publication of a number of works in Chinese on language-related topics. However, nearly all contemporary Chinese philosophical research that fits into the framework of the philosophy of language is built upon the introduction of Western ideas. Original Chinese research in this field is scarce. What

is the cause of this lack of interest in language among Chinese philosophers? Can views on language in classical Chinese philosophy be considered as a form of the philosophy of language? Is there a future for the philosophy of language in China? With these questions, I addressed Chen Baoya, a lecturer of the Department of Chinese language and literature at Beijing University, who actively writes on language related problems. Chen observed:

The so-called philosophy of language in China is built upon Western achievements and research in the field, including analytic philosophy and hermeneutics. However, there is hardly any original research done by Chinese scholars in the domain of the philosophy of language. The purpose of the introduction of Western ideas in the field of the philosophy of language is to get a better understanding of related disciplines such as, for example, literature. Thus, the Western philosophy of language is used by Chinese scholars as a theory and a method to solve some concrete research problems in related study disciplines.

Chen explained the reasons the philosophy of language has not developed in China, as follows:

First of all, the emphasis of Chinese philosophical research is on the study of classical philosophical works such as the *Analects* by Confucius, the *Mozzi*, or the *Xunzi*. The majority of Chinese scholars involved in philosophical research study the history of classical Chinese philosophy. The main purpose of those Chinese scholars who study Western philosophy is to introduce and describe Western ideas and philosophical currents.

Another reason the philosophy of language did not develop in China is the division of disciplines in the system of education. Philosophy in China is classified under human sciences. For this reason, students of philosophy are not offered any systematic training in mathematical logic or mathematics. Therefore, they are not prepared for the exact methods used by Western philosophy, including the philosophy of language, and cannot apply the same methods to the Chinese language.

Third, scholars interested in language and linguistics work mainly in the departments of language and know little about philosophy. In the West, philosophy constitutes its own department. Although China also has separate departments of philosophy, there are very few separate departments of language covering all aspects of language-related studies.

To the question of whether the views on language in classical Chinese philosophy can be considered a form of the philosophy of language, Chen answered:

Some Chinese philosophers of the past were interested in language. For example, Xunzi elaborated on language problems in his works. However,

his aim was not to study the philosophical aspects of language and the relationship between language and philosophy, but to make the connection between the name and the object it denotes. His views on language were, strictly speaking, not philosophical. In general, philosophy in China is typically a branch of human sciences, whereas in the West it freely makes use of the methods of exact sciences. The latter has a connection with the difference in Chinese and Western modes of thinking. The West is more adept with mental analysis, whereas China emphasizes cultural spirit.

Chen Baoya showed full confidence in the successful development of the philosophy of language in China. However, he pointed out that China is more accustomed to explaining its own culture and to studying its own philosophical heritage. The form that the philosophy of language may take on Chinese soil, according to Chen, will most likely be the analysis of Chinese culture through language. When scholars start working in this field, they will most probably develop in the direction outlined by Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir—namely, that different nations have different modes of thinking cast by their respective languages. This type of research will inevitably influence Chinese culture and the methods of philosophical studies.

This issue of *Contemporary Chinese Thought* explores the current state of research into the philosophy of language in China.

The first article, Gong Jianping's "On Language," treats language as understood in Daoist and Buddhist thought, and represents a rather often-read approach to ancient Chinese texts through Western philosophical works. The author examines the connections between language and the way (*dao*), language and existence, and language and human beings as viewed in the Daoist works *Lao zi* and *Zhuang zi*, as well as in Buddhism.

The second article, Yan Xiaofeng's "Disputes Over Words and Meanings in the History of Chinese Philosophy" (here presented in an abridged translation), also focuses on views on language in Chinese philosophy; but, it is much more detailed and embraces a larger time span. The tradition of "disputing over words and meanings" that originated in pre-Qin philosophy, and which lasted until the Ming and Qing dynasties, is represented by many prominent scholars, artists, and Buddhist and Daoist monks. Well-documented and comprehensive, this article attempts to raise methodological issues and to evaluate the role of these disputes in Chinese philosophy.

As mentioned above, the majority of Chinese articles in the field of the philosophy of language introduce Western ideas and concepts. Both the third and the fourth articles, Chen Baoya's "An Analysis of the Conceptions of Language in the Twentieth Century's Philosophy of Language," and Tu Jiliang's "The Place of the Philosophy of Language in Modern Western Phi-

losophy,” belong to this category—that is, they present an overview of the development of the philosophy of language in the West. Chen and Tu’s articles are notable in that, in addition to a mere introduction of Western ideas, both authors also endeavor to analyze and adopt them. Chen Baoya attempts to marry analytic philosophy and hermeneutics, advocating a “new progressive philosophy of language.” Tu Jiliang, on the other hand, connects Western research in the field with the ideological foundation of contemporary Chinese philosophy, Marxism, and sees the necessity of creating a Marxist philosophy of language.

Wang Lu’s article, “On the Nature and Significance of the Linguistic Turn,” outlines the problems faced by Chinese philosophers due to the lack of their knowledge of modern logic. Wang Lu is in favor of an active study of logic in China, and expresses his wish for a Linguistic Turn to occur in China, in order to make modern logic a common method of philosophical research for Chinese scholars.

Last but certainly not least, Chen Baoya’s “The Two Modes of Language Influencing Cultural Spirit,” treats the fundamental difference between the Indo-European and Chinese modes of thinking from the perspective of Indo-European and Chinese languages. This article is inspired by the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, and represents original research done in China in the field of the philosophy of language.

An interesting feature of Tu, Wang, and Chen’s articles is that even though they know works and theories of Western scholars in their minutest details, none of them seems to be aware of the research done in the field of language philosophy by Western sinologists. For example, in his article on logic, Wang cites works by Western philosophers exclusively, and seems to overlook the achievements of China’s own tradition of logic. Agnus Graham’s study of neo-Mohist logic, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* (1978), would be very interesting in the context of Wang’s argument—but Wang seems to be unaware of this work. When Wang speaks about the concept “being,” he leaves aside the question of Chinese correspondences to this important philosophical concept, an issue that was discussed almost thirty years earlier by Graham in his “Being in Western Philosophy Compared with *Shi/Fei* and *Yu/Wu* in Chinese Philosophy” (1959). It is likewise regrettable that Chen does not appear to know about the reactions and further research that Alfred Bloom’s *The Linguistic Shaping of Thought: A Study in the Impact of Language on Thinking in China and the West* (1981) gave rise to, since the discussed problems are similar to those tackled in Chen’s second article. Likewise, Chen is unaware of Graham’s article, “Relating Categories to Question Forms in Pre-Han Chinese Thought” from his book, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (1986, pp. 360–

411), and the response to this article by Jean-Paul Reding, "Greek and Chinese Categories" (1986, pp. 349–74).

The philosophy of language is a relatively new field of philosophical research in China. Having their own philosophical tradition of handling the relationship between language and culture, Chinese scholars should marry this tradition with the best achievements of the Western tradition on language philosophy. If Chinese, Western, and Western sinological research could be blended into one united theory, a new and enriched philosophy of language would emerge to enhance our understanding of language and its role in philosophy.

Katia Chirkova
Leiden University

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Contemporary Chinese Thought contains translations of articles from Chinese sources, primarily scholarly journals and collections of articles published in book form. The aim of the journal is to present the more important Chinese studies in this field in the light of those who are professionally concerned with it.

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