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A BRIEF HISTORY OF EVOLUTION OF CHINESE LANGUAGE

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

Change of a Language is an interesting topic to be studied for all countries and for all civilizations, no matter whether the civilization concerned still exists or has disappeared. Chinese language has been undergoing continuous changes since ancient past. Most of the scholars trace the history of Chinese language as far back as middle of the 2nd millennium BC based on archaeological sources. It is so old that it is impossible to guess anything about its origin and exact course of development. Hence, it is quite natural that scholars' opinion on various aspects and issues relating to Chinese language, its development and structural changes mark sharp differences. Nevertheless, there is also unanimity on the main trends and tendency of change and growth. This paper made an attempt to analysis the changes that has occurred in Chinese language from the ancient past.

INTRODUCTION

Language is the product of the collective living of a community of people. It is a medium with the help of which people of one community communicate with the people of other communities. How to begin the study of a language is a difficult question to answer and the more difficult question is from which time one should ideally start this study and what are the socio-linguistic features of the concern era especially in case of very ancient languages like that of the Chinese or that of the Vedic Sanskrit of our Indian society. Scholars have to satisfy themselves with the historic records and the archaeological materials available to them for this purpose. Some scholars attempt to trace back the shape and the features of the pre-historic language system of a society through conjecture, mostly based on the earliest available historic materials. Needless to mention is the fact that literature constitute the basic source materials for the study of the preceding historical features of a language.

People living in different parts of the world, speak different languages, incomprehensible to one another. Like India, Chinese people speak large number of languages rather many varieties of Chinese language. What gives rise to the variation in languages is an interesting subject of study and discussion by the linguists of different speech community. However, there cannot be a single cause to which language change or variation can be attributed. There are many factors responsible for change in a language; social, cultural, political, demographic factors play an important role in language shift. Language change or shift is rapid in those areas where mobility and social stability is high (Rubenstein, 1957:286) and is low where cultural change is comparatively low and stagnant. It is very difficult to exactly stress the day since it underwent changes. Linguists belonging to different branches of linguistic said language change are slow that sometimes it takes centuries.

Historical background of Chinese Language

A language such as Chinese is quite ancient with a long history of its own. There are ample evidences which proves Chinese language has been undergoing continuous change since ancient past. Most of the scholars, roughly speaking, trace the history of this language as far back as middle of the 2nd millennium BC based on archaeological sources. According to some scholars, this is when the pre-history is supposed to have come to an end and the history of the Chinese society has begun with some records as credible evidence. It is so old that it is hazardous to guess anything about its origin and exact course of development. Hence, it is quite natural that scholars' opinion on various aspects and issues of this subject mark sharp differences. Nevertheless, there is also unanimity on the main trends and tendency of change and growth which deserve attention of the scholars for a better understanding. Since it is a study of the past history of

a people, we have to largely depend upon the recorded available language source of the preceding generations.

Certain pioneering works have already been done by Bernhard Karlgren and Wang Li on the issue of the history of Chinese language. However, the views of Karlgren and Wang Li need to be studied and discussed. Wang Li's periodization of the history of the Chinese language is unique. He has divided this history from the beginning to the present into four different periods such as the archaic period (上古 shànggǔ), the medieval period (中 zhōnggǔ), the modern period (近代 jìndài) and the contemporary period (先代 xiāndài). Karlgren, on the other hand, has divided the whole period of the historic growth of Chinese language into five different phases such as Proto-Chinese (太 汉语 tàihànyǔ), Archaic Chinese (上 汉语 shànggǔhànyǔ), Ancient Chinese (中 汉语 zhōnggǔhànyǔ), Middle Chinese (近 汉语 jìnggǔhànyǔ), and Modern Chinese (近代汉语 jiàn dài hànyǔ).

The Characteristic features of Chinese language as per Wang Li's periodization are given below:

1. The Archaic Period

This period covers the all the developments and changes occurring in the Chinese language before the 3rd century A.D. from the earliest phase of the Chinese society which can never be ascertained. This includes both the pre-historic and the historic period of the Chinese society and comes to an end with the end of the illustrious Han dynasty in the year 220 A.D.

As it is considerably a very long period Wang Li is found to have inclined to term the period of the "Bone and Shell inscriptions" as the period of "Proto Chinese" (太 tàigǔqī) with certain unique features ascribed to the language of that phase. The source material of the archaic era shows the language used in the pre-Qin and pre-Han scholarly works like the Book of Poems' Analects, Meng Zi, Zuo Zhuan and 'Shi Ji' was nearer to the language that the people then used to speak. It may be noted that most of the 'Book of Poems' edited by Confucius were the songs composed and recited by the common folk. The major characteristic features of this period, as identified by Wang Li, were: first there no concept of "determinative sentences" (判断 pànduàn jù) .The determinative word "shì" (是) was not in use in the archaic period. "yě" (也) is put at the end as the "concluding word", suggesting that the "idea" intended to be expressed by the speaker has become complete. For instance, For instance,

(1) 陈良, 楚产也”(《孟子·滕文公》)。
陈良生于楚国。

At times the character "者" (者) is placed immediately after the subject and the character "也" is correspondingly placed towards the end of the whole sentence.

For Instance:

(2) 管仲夷者，颖上人也(《记管晏记列传》)
管仲，字夷，是颖上人。

Again, in some cases, the concluding word “yè” is found to have been omitted.

An illustrative sentence of this type is given below:

(3) 天下者，高祖天下(《记魏其列传》)
天下，是汉高祖的天下。

Some other type of expressions are also to be found in which both the characters “zhe” and “yè” were not used.

(4) 荀，赵人(《记荀列传》)
荀，是赵国人。

Punctuation plays an important role in clarifying the ideas and viewpoints of the thinkers so far as the written communication of a language is concerned. These may be considered as another type of visual symbols like the scripts. However, “no punctuation marks are to be found in ancient Chinese writings. The earliest form of punctuation was to leave a space of one or two characters in the text where a pause was needed. In the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) “jùdòu” (读) a simple form of punctuation was first applied in writing.

2. Transition Period

The third and the fourth century has been rightly termed by Wang Li as the transition period as it was a preparatory phase leading to the confirmation of the new trend and style of expression that ensures popular acceptance and widespread use of the new language and form by the literati class with unquestioned firmness and conviction with a firm rejection of the past language and form and it is well-known to the students and scholars of Chinese literature that this period covering a time span of 400 years and is indescribably most significant which has profound bearing on the literature of the later phase. This is termed as transition period because indication of change in language system became quite visible in this period.

3. The Medieval period

According to Wang Li the 4th century A.D. marks the beginning of the medieval period in the historic growth of the Chinese language and it continues till 12th century A.D., that is till the first half of the Southern Song dynasty (宋-Nan Song), around which period some new features are found to have appeared in the language of the people that merit attention of the scholars. As Wang Li has pointed out: not much difference was to be found between the written and the spoken language of the Wei-Jin period. It is only during the Southern and northern Song dynasties when the “parallel prose form of literature” became vogue that the difference between the written and the spoken language became sharp, barring a few essays where the difference between the written and the spoken language was too conspicuous. In this period the usage of 了(le), 被(bèi), 着(zhe) became more frequent and people started using these words in their day to day conversation. Chinese is a tonal language from the very beginning but the concept of 4th tone “声”(qùshēng) as stated by Wang Li came into existence in the medieval period.

4. Modern Period

According to Wang Li the 13th century A.D. marks the beginning of the modern period and it continues till 19th century. The main characteristic features noted by Wang Li are in this period voiced initial consonant (全浊生母) gradually started disappearing from Beijing dialect. Besides 1st tone (阴平), 2nd (阳平), 3rd (上声) and 4th (声) there also exist entering tone (入声) which was very short and composite in nature. In the modern period even the entering tone started disappearing from the Chinese language. During the first phase of the growth of the Chinese language, Buddhism played a pivotal role in the articulation of the plethora of new ideological and spiritual concepts of Indian origin into Chinese, and the Indian Sanskrit language study by the

Chinese scholars also helped in the transmission and growth of new areas of “philological study” of the Chinese language, especially more in the area of Chinese phonological investigation and research. Next, the Tang period, as the second phase of the development of the Chinese language marks the beginning of the modern Chinese period. Lu Shuxiang (湘) and most of the Chinese analysts tend to agree on this point that the host of the new elements and features of the modern Chinese (近代汉语indài hànyǔ) started occurring in the wake of the Tang-Song period (唐宋时 Tāngsòng Shíqī) of the Chinese history. (Jinag.1994:3) With the outbreak of Opium war the modern period came to an end.

5. Transition Period

The modern literature era came to an end in the in mid-19th century and some prominent change were marked in the language system. The period from 1840 to 1919 is considered to be the transition period by Wang Li. The language used for writing literature and for communication in these 60 years has tint of both modern and contemporary language. Opium War was the first formal encounter of the Chinese people with the Western World. During this time Qing government became dysfunctional in front of the imperialist power.

6. Contemporary Period

Contemporary period starts with the cultural, political and anti-imperialist, movement which started in Beijing on May 4, 1919. The main thrust of the May Fourth era language reform is, of course, undoubtedly, the change from the literary Chinese (文言文Wényánwén) to vernacular Chinese (白话文Báihuàwén). The “Báihuàwén” is a vernacular based form of written language. Hu Shi for the first time put “báihuà” and “wényán” into a state of sharp conflict and assigned to both of them as ideologies of two conflicting domains: “báihuà” and its literature was said to be living, while the “wényán”(文 gǔwén) -- the traditional literature was dead as Hu Shi remarked. Thus Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu and Lu Xun emerged as the leading intellectuals who raised the banner of literary reform in the new and modern period of Chinese history. These leading intellectuals tried to impress upon the new generation writers that they should write in peoples' language, oppose the feudal despotic systems, oppose the old rituals and old culture through their writings. Their articles depicted the gloomy aspect of the then Chinese society and called the youth to wage a war against the decadent feudalistic ideology.

CONCLUSION

Chinese language has undergone many changes since the Xia dynasty, which is considered to be the beginning of Chinese language script. The continuous change in the language has made the language more vibrant and dynamic. After the downfall of the dynastic era in 1911 the May Fourth Movement (1919) has significant contribution to make Chinese language more future oriented. After the establishment of PRC in 1949 and Reform and Opening up in 1978 China not only underwent economic changes, but there is also a major political shift. The new political and economic policy measures adopted in various Party Congresses added some new concepts to Chinese vocabulary, thus enriching the language system however the syntactic change is not that prominent.

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