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The China syndrome: language, logical form, translation

The only generalisation to make about language and science is to make no generalisation. Yuen Ren Chao

Die Sprache verkleidet den Gedanken. Und zwar so, daß man nach der äußeren Form des Kleides, nicht auf die Form des bekleideten Gedankens schließen kann; weil die äußere Form des Kleides nach ganz anderen Zwecken gebildet ist, als danach, die Form des Körpers erkennen zu lassen.¹

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.002

1 Introduction

My intention in this first chapter is to address a methodological presumption which, for better or worse, influences a great portion of the work done on Chinese philosophy, both in the West and in the East. I refer to the presumption that there is something distinctively Chinese about Chinese philosophy taken more or less in its entirety; that this feature (or these features) set(s) the path of its development; and that it (or they) must be invoked to account for whatever large and deep contrasts are perceived between it and that other strange monolith, Western philosophy.

The suggestion that we should pay attention to what is Chinese (in some very broad sense) in Chinese thought will sound rather bizarre to anyone not wedded to a radically abstract conception of argument – and will do so precisely because it is so resoundingly truistic. But of course what is characteristic of Chinese philosophical studies, not to mention the whole scientific project inspired by Joseph Needham, is not merely a proper sensitivity to some set of more or less diverse cultural factors impinging on Chinese intellectual evolution in one or another, more or less decisive fashion: what dominates is the perceived contrast with the West. Sometimes this takes the form of a trial, the

¹ ‘Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes.’

Chinese being seen to have diverged from – almost inevitably to have fallen grievously short of – some Western achievement, and the question is then, why so? But such studies, whether they plead for the defence or for the prosecution, always impose investigative patterns which Chinese material is made to fit, usually by distortion, at best by omission.

Geoffrey Lloyd has recently subjected one large family of comparativist methodologies to blistering attack in his *Demystifying Mentalities*.² I shall make my beginning with a cognate group of theories, those which cast their principles in linguistic terms, and which are of particular interest both because they prevail in philosophical studies and because their evaluation presents a special, and especially philosophical, difficulty. The mentalities approach seeks to explain a host of anthropological issues by associating a distinctive set of intellectual capacities (and limitations) with a given culture. A running theme of Lloyd's book is that it is swiftly brought to grief by the insuperable difficulties which beset any attempt to specify a well-defined social unit to which a dominant mentality might be attributed without begging all the interesting questions. Lloyd's moral is that in this sphere, at least, totalising tendencies are well nigh indefensible. But the hypotheses I shall scrutinise can boast at least one especially challenging feature. For, in comparison with most mentality approaches, their basic presumption that linguistic communities are relatively homogeneous is not patently outrageous.³

There is a twist, however. Their presumption will fail to be truly outrageous only if, paradoxically, it motivates interpretative strategies of a vauntingly ambitious character. We begin far beyond the range of dialectal differences, diachronic linguistics, the relation between spoken and written language, or the proprietary modes of expression of given cultural groupings. We begin with the structure of the language itself, as it were with *langue* rather than *parole*; structure must be understood as so fundamental as not to be subject to any of the enormous variations I have enumerated, on pain of losing that putative unitary theoretical entity, *the* language. So here is the first shift of comparativist linguistic hypotheses outside the narrow circle of the mentalities debate: their favoured terms of comparison are less vulnerable to the accusation of being mere figments of the theoretical imagination. Second, champions of linguistic comparativism do not always regard thought as intrinsically linguistic. But they *do* happily claim both

² Lloyd 1990.

³ Jean-Paul Reding's 'Greek and Chinese Categories: A Reexamination of the Problem of Linguistic Relativism' develops a judicious critique of what he considers over-hasty recognition of the relativistic influence exercised by particular languages on disparate philosophical traditions: 'if categories can be discovered through a language, this does not mean that they are relative to that language; it only means that the categories mirror themselves – though imperfectly – in language. It would also be wrong to say that language channels our thinking: it rather floods it, and it is the philosopher's duty to find the fordable places' (Reding 1986, pp. 355–6).

that linguistic structure is to some significant extent isomorphic with major thought-patterns and that it is necessarily language which imposes those patterns on thought, not the other way around. Third, this isomorphism is supposed to be apparent in the articulation of reason called philosophy, and philosophical development is judged to be positively guided and negatively constrained by the language in which it is done.

The hypothesis that basic linguistic structure at once encourages and constrains the development of philosophical tendencies and doctrines, whether fruitful or disastrous, has enjoyed a curiously persistent vogue amongst students of Chinese philosophy. For ease of reference I designate it ‘the guidance and constraint hypothesis’, and shall investigate its continuing popularity by considering the genesis of the trend both inside and outside the boundaries of Sinology proper. Quite apart from the obvious attraction it holds of affording insight into why a significant group of scholars should be wedded to a given procedure,⁴ my approach has the added advantage of helping to explain an otherwise surprising feature of comparativist methodology: its ostensible conflict with dominant philosophical anthropology. Once its pedigree has been established, the various fortunes of proponents of the hypothesis will be assessed in a series of case-studies covering topics of the greatest potential interest and importance. Dubbing the Sinological vogue for the hypothesis a ‘syndrome’ is obviously pejorative. Yet my evaluations, even if largely negative, will not only help diagnose what I shall argue is a remarkable affliction besetting comparativist philosophy of language. They will also suggest alternative ways of understanding the all-important but protean concepts of linguistic and logical form.

2 Guidance and constraint

‘Guidance and constraint’ is easy enough to enunciate; it is far less easy to make the hypothesis usefully determinate or to work out what types of linguistic phenomena should count as evidence *pro* or *contra*. ‘Guidance’ takes two forms. In its first form, where the relativist perceives success, a feature of linguistic structure will be invoked which either strongly encourages or, more commonly, at least enables the discovery of philosophical truth. In its second form, where philosophy goes ‘wrong’, we have ‘misguidance’; for example the reification of linguistic detail deemed not to correspond with reality. ‘Constraint’ can overlap with ‘misguidance’, but is usually invoked to

⁴ Some, if not all, of the scholars to be discussed critically in the sequel might very well object that I have grossly misrepresented them at the outset: since they differ so sharply over basic issues in the interpretation of Chinese philosophy and language, they can hardly constitute a real ‘group’. What I shall seek to demonstrate is that adherence to ‘the guidance and constraint hypothesis’ constitutes a problematic methodological unity more fundamental than the level on which they part company.

explain the absence from one language, and thus from one philosophical tradition, of whole departments of enquiry energetically pursued in another.

At this juncture a cardinal principle must be introduced, one flouted regularly in the literature, just as the basic requirement of thorough knowledge of the languages in question is only partially satisfied at best. Again and again participants in these discussions adduce supposedly striking and decisive instances of what might be labelled linguistic ‘dissonance’ or ‘shock’, that is, alleged examples of balked translation whose intractability is to be ascribed (the story goes) to structural divergence. But the fact is that much of this evidence constitutes, if anything, a set of counter-examples to ‘the guidance and constraint hypothesis’. That some philosophical thesis can be formulated in ancient Chinese or ancient Greek or modern English or French only by creating or adapting terminology, by novel definition or redefinition, or even by speaking in what might be felt as an alien idiom, establishes that the philosophy *is* expressible – albeit at the expense of considerable ingenuity, prolixity or both. Sinologists impressed by the trickiness of getting certain European philosophical texts into Chinese should take note of how elaborately hedged about is, and must always be, the study of ancient Greek texts in English translation. When the complex of Chinese language and thought is set against the Western model, the linguistic explanation of their differences is supposed to be fundamental, and where, as is customary, the contrast is with ancient Greek, the foundation is taken to be whatever differentiates Indo-European from all other language groups. As a result, registering examples of ‘shock’ and ‘dissonance’ will hit home if and only if they demonstrate a real inability, in principle and as a consequence of basic structure, to get something from or into Chinese: mere occasions for ingenuity will not suffice.

In several works⁵ Angus Graham took up ‘the guidance and constraint hypothesis’ and adapted it to the large-scale evaluation of Chinese philosophy.⁶ His *Disputers of the Tao* is a text to which I shall return again and again. Since Graham’s unparalleled linguistic expertise was explicitly set to philosophical work of great force and scope, both the particular form of ‘guidance and constraint’ he advocated and his objections to rival versions will amply repay study.

Graham’s exploitation of ‘dissonance’ appears to hover unstably between exaggeration of its significance and willingness to moderate his own linguistic determination strategy. Citing what he sees as Plato’s and Anselm’s ‘confusion between existence and

⁵ Most notably appendix 2 to *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Graham 1989).

⁶ Although various earlier, interesting formulations of Graham’s position are easy enough to find scattered throughout his voluminous writings, which do not simply repeat themselves on this score, the fact remains that in all essentials appendix 2 is the definitive, final enunciation of his thesis.

essence', he asserts without qualification that 'such a fallacy cannot be reproduced in Chinese'.⁷ So translation is impossible. But not quite, provided we are prepared to pay the cost of destructive syntactical innovation: 'one sees that philosophical translation from another language, which seems to enrich terminology, can involve a deterioration of syntax'.⁸ We are reassured, however, that untranslatability does not threaten 'the extreme sort of linguistic relativism', perhaps to be glossed by Graham's phrase 'invalidity is independent of particular language structures'.⁹

Now, in this particular case, as Graham is confident that treating existence as a predicate is a philosophical error (indeed *the* error of 2,000 years of Western philosophy), and I certainly am not, then – if we must talk of East/West competition – I will certainly not want to judge this round in it as he does. But the comparative exercise in any case depends on his assumption that a Chinese word or turn of phrase whose sole function is to translate Western philosophical arguments is not a real word or phrase, that is, does not represent a legitimate translation; and I fail to see that that is any better than arbitrary stipulation. Graham's defence would presumably be that when attempts to translate foreign philosophy into Chinese cause syntactical 'deterioration', the suspicion that authentic translation has not actually been achieved is well grounded: no question has been begged. Such a response persuades only if we have access to a neutral criterion for distinguishing a species of 'deterioration' favouring 'the guidance and constraint hypothesis' from (philosophically, at least) benign linguistic innovation, whether lexical or syntactical; and such a criterion should be objective in the obvious sense that the rationale for detection of 'deterioration' must not merely be falling foul of the researcher's *philosophical* convictions. Unfortunately, as Graham fails to meet this condition, mere feelings of linguistic oddity, even on the part of the *doyen* of modern Sinologists, do not carry conviction.

Perhaps the condition *is* unsatisfiable, but for an interesting reason. It is simply impossible, even for native speakers, to draw a firm line between 'odd' sentences and ones they find truly unintelligible.¹⁰ For him to avoid question-begging, Graham's

⁷ Graham 1989, p. 412. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 414. Reding neatly reverses Graham's procedure, detecting logical distortions *by* rather than *of* Chinese: 'the only road which can lead us to the Chinese categories is a study of how logical distinctions can be distorted by Chinese syntax . . . "Distortion", here, is not meant to be an abstract concept: it manifests itself as a kind of uneasiness or frustration felt by the philosopher, who, while using the language, stumbles against its limits and reacts against its imperfections by pointing them out or by propounding new forms of expression' (Reding 1986, pp. 361–2). The ultimate ancestry of something like Reding's linguistically hobbled philosophy is explored in section 6.2.

¹⁰ Much as the line between sentences and non-sentences, or grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, is not there to be drawn – except, say, by someone dogmatically committed to a meta-theory of grammar which dictates that all grammars must be sets of rules generating all and only the sentences of a language.

philosophical convictions should not influence his linguistic judgements. But they do – and in fact it may be that *no-one* can make purely linguistic judgements in any case (except grammarians, and then only about their *ad hoc*, maximally decontextualised sentences).

A related point concerns what we mean by ‘a language’. I have already emphasised that evaluation of ‘the guidance and constraint hypothesis’ is bedevilled by its proponents’ failure to apply and test it at a structural level so fundamental that the tremendous linguistic variation which threatens to dissolve the terms of cultural comparison has not yet emerged. But even when that condition is respected, it remains unclear just how much is to be abstracted away. That not blindly begging questions here is vitally important finds vivid exemplification in the prevalence of the assumption that Chinese morphology – or rather the *absence* of Chinese morphology – is quite distinctive. If anything is going to count as a significant fundamental linguistic feature, then lack of morphology in Chinese will.

This, of course, is what everyone who knows anything about Chinese knows, and it is intimately bound up with the general presumption that Chinese is fantastically ambiguous¹¹ – a presumption which goes all the way back to primary contacts, as this quotation from Matteo Ricci confirms:

I have recently given myself to the study of the Chinese language and I can promise you that it’s something quite different from either Greek or German. In speaking it, there is so much ambiguity that there are many words that can signify more than a thousand things, and at many times the only difference between one word and another is the way you pitch them high or low in four different tones. Thus when [the Chinese] are speaking to each other they write out the words they wish to say so that they can be sure to understand – for all the written letters are different from each other. As for these written letters you would not be able to believe them had you not both seen and used them, as I have done. They have as many letters as there are words and things, so that there are more than 70,000 of them, every one quite different and complex.¹²

¹¹ E.g. ‘the average lexical item found in the literature (especially the basic 2500+[i.e. graphs]) is so rich in semantic content that meaning differentiation is very difficult, with the consequence that virtually every passage is ambiguous, being subject to a multiplicity of readings until and unless a specific interpretation is given to it’ (Rosemont 1974, p. 83; this supposed near-universal ambiguity is cited in support of Rosemont’s astounding contention that written ancient Chinese, in sharp distinction from spoken, is not a natural language).

¹² Letter to Martino de Fornari (1583), quoted from Spence 1985, pp. 136–7. Ricci takes words to be (primarily) spoken objects, and apparently fails fully to absorb the fact that written signs are signs *for words*, and are not letters, i.e. signs for units of speech. But it is his so regarding graphs which guarantees his also regarding both them and what they stand for ((spoken) words) as invariant.

In contrast, John Webb imagined that absence of morphology must constitute a sort of grand linguistic liberation, or rather the state of original freedom from which all but the Chinese have since fallen:

the Chinese are never put to that irksome vexation of searching out a radix for the derivation of any of their words, as generally all other nations are, but the radix is the word and the word is the radix . . . Besides they are not troubled with variety of Declensions, Conjugations, Numbers, Genders, Moods, Tenses and the like grammatical niceties, but are absolutely free from all such perplexing accidents, having no other Rules in use than what the light of nature has dictated unto them; whereby their language is plain, easie and simple as NATURAL speech ought to be.¹³

But is Chinese so boundlessly ambiguous? And, if so, is this ambiguity integral to ‘the guidance and constraint hypothesis’? There is and can be no single acceptable answer to the question of ancient Chinese’s alleged hyper-ambiguity, for the simple reason that languages are not in themselves ambiguous. ‘Ambiguity’, in any precisely definable sense, and with any precisely delimitable extension, is a technical term which derives its meaning from this or that linguistic theory; given the range of theories on offer, there is not even agreement over the boundaries of the set of communicative phenomena dubbed ‘ambiguous’, let alone over what makes them ambiguous.¹⁴ To put this another way, the nature and degree of ambiguity one is inclined to detect in a language will depend in large part on where one favours placing the line between semantics and pragmatics, and on whether one will concede that pragmatic determination should count as resolution of meaning within the language proper. Thus, Rosemont hardly assumes that the ambiguity he insists is rife in written ancient Chinese¹⁵ is irresolvable, although his refusal to acknowledge the contribution of syntax is incomprehensible: ‘context provides the basic setting for the interpretation of passages, aided not by syntax or phonetics but by semantic information’.¹⁶ He does not pause to consider the possibility that, if context regularly determines or even dictates a single reading – or at least a manageable range of readings comparable to the flexibility evinced by most, perhaps all, languages – then the flat assertion that ‘virtually every passage is ambiguous’ is at best highly misleading. What Rosemont calls ‘interpretations’ are not items

¹³ Webb 1669, p. 192; cf. Webb 1678.

¹⁴ The point is a general one: homophony, homography, equivocity, etc. are likewise dependent on difficult decisions about both the bearers and the nature of meaning. For example, the statement that ‘homophones sound alike, but have different meanings’ is an unacceptably lax definition: but clarifying what is meant both by ‘sounding alike’ and by ‘different meanings’ will carry us into the deepest theoretical waters.

¹⁵ See n. 11 above. ¹⁶ Rosemont 1974, p. 82.

extrinsic to ancient Chinese helpfully imposed on it by the reader; rather, they are there to be discovered *in* the language, so long as one is prepared to recognise that the extent and complexity of the textual surroundings required to grasp the meaning of selected passages might differ radically between linguistic cultures.

Again, neither ancient nor modern Chinese verbs are marked for tense or the subjunctive mood. In their different ways, neither ancient nor modern Chinese marks or specifies conditional relationships to quite the extent that they are explicitly indicated in modern English, let alone in ancient Greek. But if we widen our view to take in signals beyond what morphology and syntax alone clarify, then we must resist any initial inclination to discern limits to Chinese thought imposed by Chinese language. It is convenient, perhaps inevitable, for those most familiar with Western languages and the study thereof to conceive of such extra-morphological and -syntactical signals as occurring in something called ‘the context’. Of course there is nothing objectionable as such in that designation, so long as all that is implied is that neglecting such signals will impair, perhaps even destroy, one’s ability to retrieve whatever is being said. Yet it is both difficult, and essential, to withstand the insidious temptation further to assume that since ‘context’ complements ‘text’, and ‘text’ is – obviously – semantically primary, languages which rely on contextual disambiguation for the effective communication of meaning must indeed be ambiguous at the core. The rejoinder is to insist that fixing on a given type of linguistic unit as a candidate for semantic evaluation is certainly not a theoretically innocent manoeuvre, at least from the perspective of the semanticist. If fixing semantic units for Chinese which are roughly comparable to what theorists have typically attributed to Western languages results in ‘discovering’ disproportionate ambiguity in Chinese, then the suitability of the theoretical imposition, not the communicative efficacy of the language, ought to be questioned. To take a single example, Christoph Harbsmeier displays admirable sensitivity to the importance of contextualisation in ancient Chinese (which he abbreviates to ‘AC’), but draws some surprising and unwarranted conclusions:

Aus der Kontext-Gebundenheit von AC-Sätzen ergeben sich Konsequenzen für die allgemeine pragmatische Charakterisierung dieser Sätze. Ein Satz, dessen Bedeutung sich erst aus dem Zusammenhang ergibt, ist im allgemeinen nicht primär als Abbild oder objektive Darstellung des Sachverhaltes gemeint, sondern primär als Mitteilung. Man ist versucht zu sagen, daß nur wer mitteilen will, ohne notwendigerweise auch abbilden oder objektiv darstellen zu wollen, so elliptisch reden und schreiben würde, wie das die alten Chinesen anscheinend zu tun pflegten.¹⁷

¹⁷ Harbsmeier 1979, p. 115.

I should add that I am not at all sure that I grasp what ‘communication’ might be which can omit ‘objective representation’ while ostensibly not of necessity precluding it (Harbsmeier does not elaborate on these technicalities). This reasoning betrays the theoretical bias just highlighted: if the *Satz* bereft of context is strikingly elliptical, etc., then impressive consequences for the pragmatics of ancient Chinese can be seen to flow only on the supposition that the *isolated Satz* is unquestionably the primary semantic unit to which we rightly attribute such qualities as ellipsis.¹⁸

When there is a job of communication to be done, which segments of what I think I have every right to call ‘the language’ get it done can vary considerably between languages, without affecting how well the job gets done.¹⁹ The moral for application of ‘the guidance and constraint hypothesis’ to ancient Chinese philosophy is fairly obvious. Lack of morphology is a star candidate for recognition as a fundamental linguistic influence on thought, probably under the ‘constraint’ half of the rubric. It ought to manifest itself in the guise of indeterminacy and/or ambiguity. But we must at the same time have due regard for the resources of contextual disambiguation, which of course in the case of philosophical texts emphatically do not coincide with the types of indicator governing spoken language, ancient or modern. It then emerges that the ‘ambiguity’ of ancient Chinese philosophy might indeed exist, and might be a function of language (if we are flexible enough about what we mean by a ‘function’ of language). But it cannot be viewed as an unproblematic consequence of language on

¹⁸ Harbsmeier himself later provides an extremely useful characterisation of ancient Chinese grammaticality which effectively undermines the basis for his earlier inferences: ‘Grammatikalität ist für ihn [meinen chinesischen Meister] nicht eine Eigenschaft von Sätzen als solchen, sondern eine Relation zwischen Satz, Interpretation und Kontext. Eine Theorie der Grammatikalität im Altchinesischen ist also in ganz elementarer Weise zugleich eine Theorie der Kommunikations-Kontexte. Dem Versuch, Grammatikalität rekursiv und pragmatisch kontextfrei im Hinblick auf das AC zu klären, geht jede Plausibilität ab’ (*ibid.*, p. 266). Further, his formulation of what he calls ‘das Entbehrlichkeitsprinzip’ might help us to shake off the blinkers imposed by too parochial a grammatical background: ‘Abgesehen von idiomatischen Wendungen sind im AC alle informationstheoretisch (pragmatisch) redundanten Wörter grundsätzlich grammatisch fakultative’ (*ibid.*, p. 119).

¹⁹ Roy Harris, with his customary pungency, expresses a similar attitude to ‘the metalinguistic terminology a language provides or does not provide, its resources or lack of resources for talk about language [which] reflect differences – sometimes subtle and sometimes quite obvious – between the ways in which different cultures treat language-using as a form of behaviour’ (Harris 1980, p. 21). He goes on to argue that ‘someone who agrees that this is so may none the less feel that it is going too far to say that different cultures have different concepts of what a language is. He may not realise that this view may itself be seen as reflecting a particular cultural background. For the European is the inheritor of an intellectual tradition which is strongly biased in favour of regarding languages as superficially different but fundamentally equivalent systems of expression. This assumption reveals itself in a variety of ways, including a willingness to draw a sharp distinction between “the language” and “the culture” which the language happens to serve’ (*ibid.*).

the level at which the champions of ‘guidance and constraint’ must operate – that is, on the only level at which they do not run the risk of all the fearsome problems of interpretation not generated and circumscribed by the Chinese ‘language’ (as the hypothesis must understand it).

It would be as well to remember at this juncture that generalisation over the entire range of ancient Chinese philosophy is an extremely rash undertaking. Graham claims that the later Mohist concern with both linguistic and logical accuracy impelled them to produce a form of Chinese unique in its independence from context:

in most kinds of Chinese writing one expects a word to have a variety of meanings, distinguishable in theory by looking up a dictionary, distinguishable in practice only when we have become familiar with the sort of context to which each is confined. But the key words of Mohist dialectic are shorn of all but their basic meanings; and this semantic restriction, together with the precision of the syntax, frees them from their ordinary contextual limitations.²⁰

Among many other impressive examples of both lexical and syntactic innovation undertaken for the sake of clarity, he cites the following arresting, if speculative, instance: ‘the Mohist dialecticians deliberately reserved the pre-verbal 有 (*yu*)/ 無 (*wu*) (“there are”/“there are not”) for quantification, and avoided the confusion which might result from their use in other constructions by choosing other graphs and particles’.²¹ Certainly, the Mohist logicians were atypical in both their ruling concerns and the techniques they developed to address them; but one cannot afford to dismiss the intriguing linguistic implications of their unusual writings on that score.

We have now learnt why ‘dissonance’ should not impress us, and discerned some of the difficulties for ‘the guidance and constraint hypothesis’ thrown up by the ambiguity of ‘ambiguity’ and the obscure polyvalence of the theoretical term ‘language’; our next step is to invoke the name of Benjamin Whorf, and investigate why its resonance has proved unusually persistent in Sinological circles. As a preliminary, I shall note that Graham began his study ‘The Relation of Chinese Thought to the Chinese Language’ with these words: ‘Chinese thought before the introduction of Buddhism from India is the unique instance of a philosophical tradition which, as far as our information goes, is wholly independent of traditions developed in Indo-European languages . . . It therefore provides the ideal test case for Whorf’s hypothesis that the thought of a culture is guided and constrained by the structure of its language.’²²

²⁰ Graham 1978, p. 162. ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134. ²² Graham 1989, p. 389.