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“All the aids which a beginner needs”: James Summers’ (1828-1891) research on Chinese grammar

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Citation

Chen, W. (2023, June 15). *“All the aids which a beginner needs”: James Summers’ (1828-1891) research on Chinese grammar*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3620407>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Part IV. Conclusion

This dissertation aims to provide a systematic analysis of James Summers' research regarding the Chinese language, with a focus on grammar, and identify the sources and influences of his ideas. In general, Summers' research on the Chinese language mirrors the thoughts of his precursors. However, his research did not receive a lot of attention from his successors.

1. Summers' terminology

Many of the terms employed by Summers, such as “case”, “tense” and “participle”, originated in the Greco-Latin grammatical tradition. Some of them were from sinological works on Chinese, while others were adopted from research on other languages. For example, many syntactic terms were adopted from Morell's monograph on English syntax (1852, 1853). Some of the linguistic terms are still in use today, but by Summers, they were employed as part of the common language. The term “word” is a good example of this. Appendix 3 is an inventory of “terms” Summers employed in his works.

Summers also briefly mentioned some Chinese traditional linguistic terms, like “substantial words” and “empty words”, though without providing any thorough explanation. More traces of Chinese traditional linguistic thought can be found in Summers' analysis of particles. However, Summers did not mention a single work concerning grammar written by a Chinese scholar; instead, he referred to other publications by European missionaries, such as Edkins' *Grammar of the Shanghai Dialect* (1853, p. 62), in which the Chinese scholar Bi Huazhen's³⁵⁴ research on “empty words” is introduced. Therefore, instead of gaining direct inspiration from Chinese scholars, Summers appeared to have adopted their ideas from other sinologists.

2. The characteristics of Summers' research on Chinese

After analysing Summers' research on Chinese, hybridism and eclecticism are its outstanding characteristics, which can be explained by and unified under the dominant feature of his works, i.e., a pedagogical orientation.

2.1 Hybridism

Summers was aware of the distinction between literary and vernacular Chinese, but in the majority of his examples and analysis he did not emphasise them, nor did he dedicate different

³⁵⁴ Qing dynasty, date of birth and death unknown

sections to them in his works.³⁵⁵ Although the section “Syntax of the particles” in his *Handbook* (1863a, pp. 142–179) appears to be dedicated to particles in literary Chinese, the examples in this section include examples from classical works. Two examples include *Xiào tì yě zhě, qí wéi rén zhī běn yú* 孝悌也者，其為仁之本與 ‘Filial piety and fraternal love,- these are the sources of benevolence’ (1863a, p. 153) from the *Analects* (Old Chinese) and another from vernacular fiction, *Qiě kàn xià huí fēn jiě* 且看下回分解 ‘Just look at the following chapter for explanation’ (1863a, p. 151), whose origin can be traced back to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* from the fourteenth century (Old Mandarin).³⁵⁶ His examples of the vernacular Chinese include not only quotations from vernacular novels, but also everyday expressions, like *Tā zài Guǎngdōng bù hǎo* 他在廣東不好 ‘He was not well in Canton’ (1863a, p. 98).

Furthermore, he claimed that his *Handbook* and *Rudiments* reflect the grammar of Mandarin, and amended some examples from Cantonese to illustrate expressions in Mandarin (see the introduction of 1.9 *Arte China* and 1.10 *Esop’s Fables* in Appendix 1). Some examples in his *Handbook*, such as the AAB reduplicated pattern of adjectives, reveal features of varieties of the Chinese language other than Mandarin (cf. Chapter 5).

In other words, the essence of Chinese grammar is presented to be the same in Summers’ works, no matter the period of time, or the variety of Chinese topolect. This feature is summarized as “hybridism”.

2.2 Eclecticism

Summers’ research is based on various sources, rather than on one individual work or tradition. This is especially apparent in his transcription system, his morphological research, and his syntactic analysis. His accounts of parts of speech may illustrate this. In fact, Summers presented two parts-of-speech systems in his works. The first is based on the European tradition, in which Chinese words are classified as nouns, verbs and so on (cf. Chapter 6). The second system is an eclectic system with the Chinese system as its outer shell and an inner kernel that conforms to European traditions. This second system subsumes the first system, as shown in Figure 12.

³⁵⁵ Just like Gabelentz’ comment: “[a]lter und neuer Stil sind nicht immer genügend gegeneinander hervorgehoben, während doch gerade in diesem Buch ein scharfes Auseinander halten Beider geboten schien” (1878, p. 629).

³⁵⁶ The conclusion is based on the data of Scripta Sinica database (<http://hanji.sinica.edu.tw/>, Date of access: 18 November 2022).

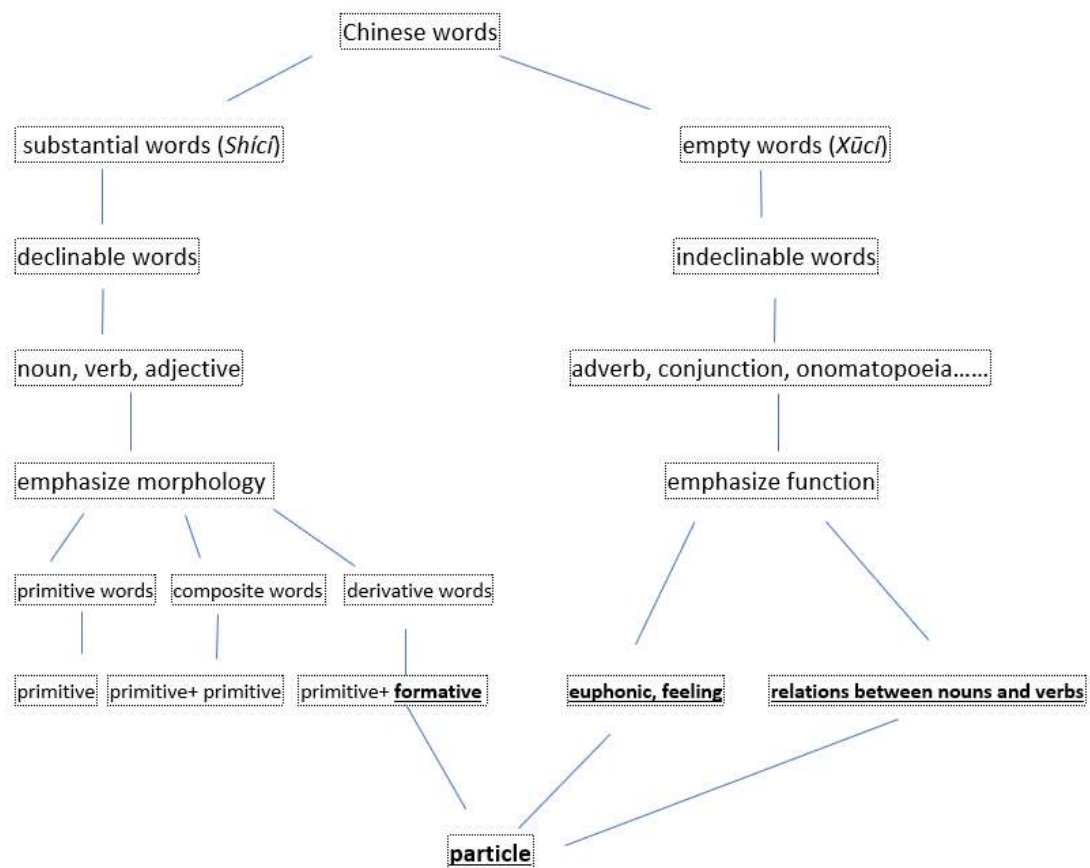


Figure 12: Parts of speech in Summers' works³⁵⁷

The terms and concepts of “substantial words” and “empty words” are rooted in Chinese linguistic tradition; however, the criterion of Summers' classification is based on the European tradition. Declinable words in European languages are considered substantial words, and so are their Chinese semantic counterparts, whereas indeclinable ones count as empty words. For the Chinese counterparts of the declinable words, Summers focused on exploring their morphological rules. For the indeclinable words, he emphasised their function.³⁵⁸

In general, European linguistic traditions and Chinese language research are both traceable in Summers' research.

2.3 Pedagogical orientation

Hybridism and eclecticism may lead to some contradictions. For instance, Summers stated clearly that Chinese nouns do not have cases, but he applied terms like “ablative” and “genitive” while explaining the relationship between different components in compounds. He also pointed

³⁵⁷ The bold and underlined items all belong to particles.

³⁵⁸ Adverbs are a special case here since Summers mentioned some morphology of adverbs, and at the same time classified them under empty words, in the sense that semantically they do not convey concrete meaning and grammatically European adverbs are indeclinable.

out that Chinese words cannot be classified in the same way as European words, since words do not inflect in Chinese. However, he still classified the words for the convenience of explaining the grammar. Furthermore, while discussing Chinese word classes, Summers implied that there is no such class as “preposition” in Chinese. However, he devoted an entire section, called “The preposition”, to those words which can be translated using English prepositions. When elaborating on the word order and concept of the “object” of Chinese, Summers adopted syntactic views on both English and Chinese, without integrating them into a consistent system. Readers might be left with a sense of inconclusiveness, which may correspond to Summers’ struggles to balance theory and practice while comparing English and Chinese grammar.

Summers adopted a European linguistic framework to some extent, which is sometimes incompatible with the Chinese language. Before concluding that Summers deliberately ignored the intrinsic characteristics of the Chinese language and forced a European framework onto it, or that Summers was Eurocentric or xenophobic (cf. Zwartjes 2011, p. 11), one ought to view his methodology from a different perspective: Summers had his own concerns and clear reasons for rendering Chinese grammar the way he did. This can be summarized as the “pedagogical orientation” of his works.

In *The Psychology of the Child*, psychologists Jean Piaget (1896–1980) and Bärbel Inhelder (1913–1997) summarized their thoughts on child psychology and proposed two hypotheses of cognitive development, i.e., assimilation and accommodation. For them, assimilation is the “filtering or modification of the input” in order to “become incorporated into the structure of the subject”, while accommodation is “the modification of internal schemes to fit reality” (Piaget and Inhelder 2000 [1962]), p. 5). In other words, when learning new things, we first try to apply what we have already known to conceive of the world, and then revise our schemata in accordance with the positive or negative feedback received (Thelen and Smith 2006, p. 304). Summers’ audiences were trained and educated in the European linguistic tradition. It is only reasonable therefore to teach them a peculiar language, Chinese, with familiar terminology and pedagogy first (Hovdhaugen 1996, p. 18; Klöter 2011a, p. 86, p. 99; Zwartjes 2011, p. 14), while simultaneously adding information on features of the Chinese language, such as their analysis of classifiers. Summers’ research is not the bed of Procrustes, but rather an adaption of the European framework with concessions to adjust the characteristics of the Chinese language.

Modern psychology suggests that innovation cannot be generated from nowhere, but has to be based on preceding research. A new achievement has to be in accordance with the

established standards and values in order to be accepted (Breitenbach 2000, p. xxi). To make his research recognized by other European scholars and accepted by his students, Summers had to base his ideas on European traditions and the research of his precursors.

Furthermore, teaching the Chinese language is a practical activity. Although there was, of course, a certain amount of theoretical guidance behind Summers' teaching activities and research, theoretical rules were not of any serious concern to Summers or his students. For Summers, Chinese has, for example, no cases in theory, but in the teaching process, some compromises had to be made. Lǐ Bǎojiā (2007, p. 17) and Gianninoto (2018, p. 149) summarized the features of textbooks and pedagogical works. These works are designed for practical and immediate purposes: in order to be practical and to help the students to learn fast, they are unavoidably superficial and concise in their theoretical descriptions (or discard some theoretical rules). At the same time, they provide many examples with transcriptions and literal translations. This is the nature of textbooks, and this is reflected in Summers' *Rudiments* as well. Although his *Handbook* was not really for immediate use, he needed to make concessions on his theoretical propositions in this textbook, too.

3. The contribution of Summers' research to the historiography of linguistics

Most of Summers' ideas on Chinese grammar were derived from his precursors. It is clear that, although Summers himself belonged to the Anglican church, the works of the missionaries from other religious orders, such as the Jesuits, also inspired Summers indiscriminately, which was very common in the field of Chinese missionary linguistics (cf. Masini 2017, pp. 16–26; Uchida 2017, p. 230).

Instead of classifying words into two classes according to their inner structure, Summers classified them into three types, namely primitive, compound and formative. He made an original contribution when he divided Chinese compounds into two classes according to the relation between their components, i.e., appositional and in construction. His point of view about “auxiliary verbs” is also very interesting because it starts out from a general notion in the European tradition that consider them closer to verbs than to formatives.

In his research on classifiers, Summers pointed out that when classifiers are placed to the right of their nouns, the entire unit expresses a general term. This original observation was mentioned later on by Wade (1867). Moreover, Summers touched upon the topic of existential sentences when discussing the omission of prepositions. It is unfortunate that he did not explore this idea any further.

Summers' research on Chinese particles is very clear and consistent. The thread that goes through the entire discussion is that particles have two basic functions, i.e., marking the relation of the words in a sentence and enhancing the euphony of a sentence. Although each individual function is not described by him for the first time, he integrated the ideas of his precursors into a cohesive thesis. These two functions were also noted by Gabelentz in his successive works. Additionally, Summers applied these two functions to discuss whether the particle *de* can be omitted before a noun, an idea that cannot be found in his precursors' or successors' works.

For syntax, Summers introduced the general framework of Morell's research on English syntax into Chinese, which had not been adopted by his precursors.

Whether entirely original or not, Summers formulated some clear views on other aspects of the Chinese language as well. He clearly saw that there is a distinction between literary and vernacular Chinese: literary Chinese is older and words in this variety tend to be monosyllabic, while vernacular Chinese is not monosyllabic in the sense that words are normally disyllabic or polysyllabic. Summers argued that the fallacy of classifying Chinese into a monosyllabic language at the level of the word derived from the confusion between the writing system and the language system.

Apart focusing on the Chinese language only, Summers' interests expanded to the realms of literature, history, politics, and the economy of China and Asia more generally. Like the missionaries, Summers also translated the Bible and other evangelizing works. His identity is best defined by his work as a trendsetting Chinese teacher in a European university, who had first-hand experience with and active knowledge of Chinese and China, which therefore allowed him to teach vernacular Chinese to European students. His *Handbook* is the first Chinese textbook published in Britain, and he is the first professor of Chinese who conducted systematic research on Chinese grammar in Britain. Additionally, he was also a bridge between Asia and Europe, collecting and spreading knowledge about the East to European readers, as well as introducing Europe to China. His Chinese articles, which introduce basic knowledge about English to native Chinese speakers in his *Flying Dragon*, are most likely the earliest ones published in Europe. His catalogue of the Indian Office Library is the first of the East Asian collections at this institution. Language, as the foundation of comprehending Asian cultures, was only part of his broader interests. The Chinese language, for Summers, was not easy to acquire, but deserved to be studied. As he said to his audience at the very beginning of his professional career in his inaugural lecture:

Were it a discourse upon the geography, the history, the natural productions, or the arts and manufactures of China, the subject would

be comparatively easy to lay before you, and one in which you would naturally take much more interest; but the language of a people, at once so ancient, so peculiar, so exclusive, and so far removed from the civilization and refinement of our western world, presents difficulties of no ordinary magnitude, the consideration of which will perhaps somewhat tax your patience (Summers 1853a, p. 10).

To conclude, Summers' main contribution to the research on Chinese linguistics does not lie in innovative insights but in the synthesising of prior achievements, including the time-honoured linguistic tradition in Europe, comprising for instance terms like "case" and "gender", and drawing on prevailing works in the nineteenth century, such as Morell's (1852, 1853) research, as well as that of sinologists on China and Chinese, for example, Dyer (1840), Bridgman (1841) and Schott (1857). His research took the Indo-European tradition as its core and at the same time took notice of the inherent features of Chinese. On top of that, he produced a number of original ideas. Overall, Summers was not a linguist, and the purpose of his works was not to discuss theoretical issues. His works show overt pedagogical characteristics. As a representative of Chinese research in his era, he tried to provide beginners with all the materials and knowledge of the Chinese language that he thought were necessary. The title of this dissertation pays homage to Summers' pedagogical efforts by way of a quotation from Summers *Handbook*, his most comprehensive work on Chinese:

In the work which the author now ventures to present to the public, he thinks [...of] all the aids which a beginner needs in this most difficult study. (1863a, p. xii)