

Analysis of an Invented Writing System for the Shanghainese Language

Logan Simpson, SOAS University of London

In 1854 a phonetic writing system for the Shanghainese language was invented by an American missionary. However, shortly after its publication it was abandoned and forgotten. The purpose of this study is to restore and analyze the writing system to establish its practicality; as well as to use it as a source to check for sound changes in Shanghainese between the mid 1800s and present. As an invented missionary writing system it will serve as a precious phonological source. The restoration and analysis of the writing system will fill a research gap of missionary documentation of what are now known as Chinese dialects (Zwartjes, 2018).

The present study uses qualitative methods to analyze and restore the invented writing system, and uses the restoration to check for historical sound change. The restoration of the writing system provides all symbols with equivalent International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols. Following the restoration to IPA is an explanation of the rules for combining initial and final symbols to form a single character, as well as rules for tonal distinction. The analysis of the restored orthography compares its development with the academic criteria for orthography development, and finds that it is a sound writing system. The evaluation also reviews the sociolinguistic criteria crucial for orthography acceptance, and shows that the writing system does not meet these criteria in present day Shanghai. The results of the check for historical sound change confirm that many of the sounds not found in present day Shanghainese existed in this writing system. The phones found in this writing system are able to confirm the disappearance or merger of various sounds in Shanghainese since the mid 19th century.

As Zwartjes (2018) points out, there is a huge gap in the literature of the missionary documentation of Chinese dialects. Since the language reforms of the 1950s, Mandarin was the favored language and thus many dialects have been forgotten in academic publications. This study will be the first complete restoration and description of this orthography. Over the past century, as Shanghai has grown and developed into the most populated city in the world it has surely been exposed to other Chinese and foreign languages and has thus experienced more rapid phonological changes than most languages experience in hundreds of years. This writing system, which has never been used as a source to check for sound change, can now be a concrete reference for phoneticians to compare sound changes for Shanghainese from the mid 19th century. In addition to the scientific contributions this study may offer, other practical relevance can be divulged from the orthographic analysis. After establishing whether this orthography is capable of fully expressing all possible sounds and words in Shanghainese it can then be determined how easily it could be learned. Upon establishing the degree of difficulty of learning the orthography, its practicality at representing the Shanghainese and other languages can be established.

References

Zwartjes, O., 2018. Missionary Dictionaries. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*.