



The Linguist

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Chinese: over-simplified?

When people talk about the Chinese language it is often assumed to refer to Simplified Chinese (SC) rather than Traditional Chinese (TC). Another misconception is that the Chinese used in China today is 'orthodox' compared to the Chinese spoken elsewhere. The assumptions, misunderstandings and myths that surround Chinese, and its differences in Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China and other countries and regions, create difficulties for interpreters and translators, as well as for those studying the language. Many language service providers (LSPs) in the West have no clear idea about the fundamental differences between TC and SC. While many know that Cantonese uses Traditional characters, they may not be aware that Mandarin speakers in Taiwan do as well.

In Chinese culture, calligraphy was long considered the chief of the 'three perfections'. TC was used for thousands of years until the simplification of Chinese characters started in 1956 in the People's Republic of China. For the new writing system, characters were removed, merged or reformed. Some were borrowed from Japanese kanji, as many Chinese scholars had been studying in Japan since the Meiji Restoration (1868). As SC became an official script in China, Traditional characters stopped being taught in schools.

The List of Commonly Used Standard Chinese Characters (通用規範漢字表, 2013) contains 8,105 characters and has a table of correspondence between 2,546 SC characters and 2,574 TC characters, along with other selected variant forms. While many characters are the same in TC and SC – for example, the pronouns 我 ('I'), 他 ('he') and 她 ('she') – others are significantly different.

Simplified characters tend to have fewer strokes, such as 听 ('listen/hear'), which is 聽 in TC. The first character of words like 'silence' and 'sink' are pronounced the same but written differently in TC (沈默, 'silence'; 沉没, 'sink'), while in SC the same character is used for both: 沉. Some people prefer SC because they find it is easier to memorise characters with fewer strokes. Preferences also vary geographically. I favour traditional TC, because I believe that meaning was lost when elements were removed as each component

of a character has a unique meaning. For example, the Traditional character 愛 ('love') contains the character for 'heart' (心) in the centre, but it is removed in SC (爱). I would argue that love without heart is meaningless.

It is not only depth of meaning that is lost, but also the connections with ancient Chinese people and their 5,000-year history and culture. We can see this in the TC character for 'listen/hear' (聽). It has three major components – ear, eye, mind/heart – to signify that one uses ears to listen, eyes to see unspoken words/gestures, mind to think about what one has heard and heart to listen intently. The Simplified character 听 has only two components: mouth and half a kilogram. This loses the original meaning and seems to imply shouting or arguing with others.

When learning Chinese, I recommend starting with TC: once you understand the origins of the language, it should be easier to learn the simplified version. When interpreting and translating, you should consider the target audience, the hidden meaning of the source language, culture and history in both source and target languages, and the purpose and goal of the translation/interpreting for the target audience.

For me, the knowledge and understanding that were lost in simplification bring to mind the words of the early 19th-century poet, calligrapher and intellectual Kung Tzu-chen: "To eliminate a country, one must first eliminate its history". I would add that eliminating a history starts with eliminating its language, including its letters or characters.

I have written more about this on my website: <https://cutt.ly/versevoice>.

Gene Hsu MCIL



Empathy is key

I am writing about the article 'Centring Empathy' (TL64,3). I have been interpreting for nearly 20 years and from experience I believe us interpreters to be intelligent, flexible people who know the environment we are to provide service in. It is obvious that medical interpreting should be treated with empathy and understanding.

I have a lot of service users, as well as clients/patients, asking for my services as I can explain certain technical vocabulary that is beyond their understanding. Yes, I have a medical background and, likely, a better understanding of medical terminology than some of my colleagues. I have a certain understanding of the Latin and Greek terms as this was compulsory with any medical studies in my country (Poland).

When I was studying for the Met Police interpreting qualification I was offered extra lessons in medical vocabulary and was astonished how dry they were. There is more to medical interpreting than just knowing the right words. Some patients are very much clued up on their diagnosis and are aware of what is going on, but some are not and they need more empathy and compassion.

I was surprised to read in this article that empathy has become an issue. That said, I have heard from clients many times that other interpreters were very stern and detached, and often on their phones. It makes a difference when the interpreter actually engages with the patient; this creates a friendly and endearing atmosphere, and patients are more at ease and more likely to ask for that interpreter again and again.

I recall there was an issue aired in the media about courses to teach nurses how to care. That is farcical: if you do not know how to care, do not go into a caring profession. In my mind it should be a natural reaction, as we spend a lot of time with patients undergoing chemotherapy, or following a stroke or severe injuries. Apart from interpreting, they also need reassurance, compassion and a caring companion, and we are the only ones they can immediately turn to. I hope that sharing my experiences in medical interpreting might help to empower my colleagues.

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