

## The place of Chinese grammar in Saussure's *Cours*

F. de Saussure based most of his ideas about general linguistics on Indo-European languages, but other language families (Semitic, Finno-Ugric) are given some space in the *Cours*. A few passages mention Chinese as an “extreme” example of what is possible among languages. In this paper we show that some general knowledge about Chinese influenced Saussure’s doctrine of the arbitrariness of the sign, his ideas about the place of morphology in a general theory of grammar, and his views about the relationship between writing and language. But Saussure’s conception of Chinese grammar reflected general ideas which were known to be inaccurate even before his time. We discuss whether Saussure’s arguments can still be maintained in light of a more modern structural analysis of the Chinese languages.

A tendency to misunderstand Chinese characters in relation to spoken varieties of Chinese often causes confusion about the language, both in the East and the West. Saussure, however careful to distinguish speech from writing, fell into many of these traps. In particular, Saussure embraced the “Monosyllabic Myth”, the notion that Chinese words are made up of single-syllable units. This myth persists largely because of the way Chinese writing is used to represent classical and more contemporary varieties alike. Embracing the mistaken idea that each Chinese character corresponds to a spoken word, Saussure consequently comes to characterize Chinese as an “ultra-lexicological type” of language.

While Saussure’s classification of Chinese may be approximately correct for written, Classical varieties of Chinese, it is incorrect for spoken varieties of Chinese. But information about the differences between the classical written and contemporary spoken Chinese languages was not unavailable to Saussure. His contemporaries had recognized, and explicitly written about, the divergences between the “Classical Chinese” and spoken varieties. The French Sinologist Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, for instance, organizes his grammar, *Éléments de la grammaire chinoise, ou, Principes généraux du kou-wen ou style antique: et du kouan-hoa c’est-à-dire, de la langue commune généralement usitée dans l’Empire chinois* (1822), around two languages that employ different grammatical systems. This grammar offers evidence for morphological processes in Chinese, undermining Saussure’s classification of Chinese as “ultra-lexical”.

Thus, we infer that Saussure must have learned about Chinese largely from second-hand sources (Abel-Rémusat was a correspondent of W. von Humboldt), since his interest in Chinese grammar arose later in his life (personal communication from M.L. Gautier to F. Godel). Most references to Chinese found in the *Cours* seem to have come from the third notebook, showing that Saussure was increasingly broadening the content of his Course on General Linguistics away from Indo-European. Had Saussure continued to investigate Chinese grammar, given the available knowledge at the time of his lectures, he would have probably come to the conclusion that all languages have a degree of *relative arbitrariness*, and would have given us insights about how to develop theory of comparative grammar that was not based on related languages. Saussure’s misconceptions about Chinese, then, are not detrimental to his general conception of linguistics.