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topic of the conference:

teaching Chinese – action and critical reflection: living theories, action plans and strategies

ABSTRACT

Searching for word stress in Chinese: a hunt for the Yeti?

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In languages such as Czech, English etc., word stress (WS) refers to a regular sound prominence of a particular syllable in a polysyllabic word, e.g. *Tuesday*, *forget*. A crucial function of WS is to facilitate perceptual identification of word boundaries in fluent speech. Thus, an indispensable feature of WS is stability of its position in a particular word.

In Chinese (a tone language) the situation is rather complex. Mandarin Chinese has both tone and stress. One of means of expressing whether a syllable is stressed or not is a degree of fullness of its tone. Nearly all Chinese morphemes carry lexical tone. Tonal morphemes generally need to have their tone fully realized, in order to distinguish their meaning. Subsequently they have good reasons to resist tone weakening. However, WS is based on the contrast between unstressed, weak syllables, and stressed, prominent syllables. It requires manipulation of pitch and/or duration. This may damage or reduce tone contours.

Regarding WS in Chinese, a major issue is disyllabic words which constitute almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of common vocabulary. Most of them comprise of two tonal morphemes (e.g. *dàxué* 大学). Judgements of native speakers about the position of stress in such words are notoriously inconsistent. Moreover, accentuation of many words is unstable (e.g. *Běijīng dàxué* 北京大学 vs. *dàxué jiàoshī* 大学教师) which contradicts the very concept of word stress. It is true that there is a group of words with a 100% stable stress pattern: the words with a neutral tone on the second syllable (e.g. *dòufu* 豆腐); they are commonly said to have stress on the first syllable. However, we rather suggest to speak of non-stress on the second syllable in such words.

This paper questions feasibility of the Western linguistic concept of WS in Chinese. One of the arguments is the fact there is a vast array of different, often contradictory solutions, e.g. (1) WS in Chinese does not exist; (2) there are two stress patterns for disyllabic words: 重轻, 重重; (3) there are three stress patterns: 重轻, 中重, 重中, etc. None of the solutions is accepted by the majority of linguists.

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