

TRACING VARIATION IN OLD CHINESE: WHAT, IF ANYTHING, WAS “*YǎYÁN* 雅言”?

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ABSTRACT

Based on the single pre-Qin attestation of the compound *yǎyán* 雅言 in the Confucian *Analects* (*Lúnyǔ* 論語 7.18) the idea of a normative spoken standard language is often projected back by early modern and modern authors into remote pre-imperial antiquity. An overview of the conceptual history of the term and of the competing etymologies of *yǎ* in early Chinese texts is offered in order to problematize this “invented tradition” and its ideological baggage. Four types of evidence (uniformity of phonology and syntax in excavated texts, ode citation practices, phonophoric repair by double phonophoric characters, lexical variation) are then presented and their usefulness to support an early written standard of elite inter-communication is discussed. Straightforward creolization and mixed language accounting for the emergence of Old Chinese are rejected. Instead, a scenario of interrupted language transmission in a highly diverse linguistic *Sprachbund* area is sketched and argued to best account for the

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observed asymmetries between a high degree of early lexical and orthographical variation (including substrate influences) on the one hand, and phonological and syntactic uniformity of texts from geographically diverse areas on the other.

KEYWORDS

Pre-Qin normative language Lingua franca Interrupted language transmission Creolization

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional approaches to the reconstructed phonology of Old Chinese, but also to the historical syntax and sociolinguistic situation of pre-imperial China are typically characterized by a disquietingly monolithic view. The widespread tacit assumption of linguistic uniformity, attributed to the early emergence of a normative ‘refined speech’ (*yǎyán* 雅言) of nobility intercommunication during the Zhōu period is partly due to the nature of the sources at our disposal to reconstruct ancient dialects, social backgrounds, pragmatic settings, registers, and contact scenarios. In fact, the obstacles are not fundamentally different from those encountered elsewhere. Thus, the “impossibility of Old English dialectology” lamented by Hogg (1988), largely depends on a “tunnel vision” of a tiny segment of society able to write, linked to monastic institutions, heavily depending on Latin models of syntax, whose texts have been preserved in less than 200 manuscripts (Lenker 2000, 226). In the Chinese case, the assumption of an early “normative” language standard more often than not seems to be influenced by subliminal political narratives of unification, centralization and purity which have crept into the linguistic descriptions over millennia. In traditional historiography, periodically resurfacing attempts to retrospectively streamline the ethnic and cultural landscape were especially prominent in times of disunion or foreign elite dominance, driven by the ideological exigencies of empire building in the respective presents. They can be traced back at least to the Warring States (441–221 BCE) period, possibly even earlier (Allan 1984), and continue to this very day.¹ Like retrospective postulations of a “standard language” in the history of English, there is little room for variation in such constructs and ideology