



## The Uprising of the Chinese Language in a Technological Age

Yongmou Liu (✉) 

Renmin University of China, 59 Zhongguancun Street, Haidian District Beijing, 100872, China

[legend74@163.com](mailto:legend74@163.com)

### Abstract

This essay for the inaugural issue of *Technology and Language* shows how the rise or „uprising“ of technology also produces an upheaval of language in China. This concerns not only the relation of literary language and so-called internet language which is a hybrid of symbols, sounds, images, and text. It also concerns the languages of ethnic minorities as well as the relation of Chinese to English. Not only in academic publishing there is a shift from the consideration of literary vs. non-literary languages to that of valid vs. invalid ones. It is not the expression of thoughts but the recruitment of an audience that validates writing. These and other changes cannot be described simply as a degradation of language but need to be viewed as an uprising also in terms of a liberation of language.

**Keywords:** Chinese; Language; English; Communication; Technological age

### Аннотация

В этом эссе для первого выпуска журнала „Технологии в инфосфере“ (*Technology and Language*) говорится о том, как «восстание машин», или развитие технологий, приводит к языковым изменениям в Китае. Это касается не только различий между литературным языком и так называемым интернет-языком, который представляет собой гибрид символов, звуков, изображений и текста. Это также касается языков этнических меньшинств, а также отношения китайского языка к английскому. Не только в научной литературе происходит сдвиг от противопоставления литературных и не-литературных языков к анализу действующим или недействующим языков. Главным становится не выражение мыслей, а форма, подходящая для аудитории. Эти и другие изменения нельзя рассматривать как деградацию языка, скорее их нужно понимать как развитие языка в современном мире.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



## The Uprising of the Chinese Language in a Technological Age

Our age is an age of technology rather than of science. The naive view in the 20th century that technology is an application of science, is obviously out of date. In fact, the view that science is a privileged, authoritative or “noble” way of searching for truth has never dominated in China. Instead, the reason to accept science is that it can help achieve the practical goals of the industrial technological complex. With the ever more profound integration of science, technology, industry, and the military, the newly emerging concept of “technoscience” has easily gained acceptance by many Chinese scholars. In short, at the turn of the 21st century the rise and “uprising of technology” is dissolving the knowledge hierarchy of noble science and craftsmanship, of science and technology.

In terms of a broad definition of technology, the whole of language can be regarded as a technological tool for communicating information and ideas. Even from a narrow definition of technology, language includes the crucial features of a technology for its existence and evolution: According to Marxism, language originated in labor marked by the use of tools. Without technology, it is only intuitive activity but not labor. To organize work, language must be used as a communication tool. In other words, language has a natural basis such as the evolution of speech organs, but its sociality is of greater importance, which corresponds to the relationship between the natural basis and sociality of technology.

The dichotomy between nobility and vulgarity in language has existed all over for a long time. When the technological age comes into full swing, the “uprising of technology” also shows up increasingly in language. Writing has always been superior to speech and painting in China, as evidenced by the worship of written texts and writing tools as cultural artefacts, including the traditional superstition that paper with written characters on it is a sacred kind of thing. Speech is divided into official and popular languages. In the *Classics of Poetry*, the earliest collection of poetry in China, there is a division of Feng (风), Ya (雅) and Song (颂), with an obvious sense of class distinction. Writing is divided into Jing (经), Shi (史), Zi (子) and Ji (集), with a sense of ranking as well. Popular novels were lacking in prestige for a long time. Derrida criticized the Western tradition as a phono-centrism, which seems to be different from the situation in China. He also distinguished between good and bad writing, the former is logos, eternal and otherworldly, while the latter *différance*, mortal and mundane. He hoped to deconstruct the suppression of writing. There is a similar condition in Chinese, requiring a liberation movement for language as well.

In the technological age, the criteria for nobility and vulgarity of language are dying out, or, the criteria are becoming diversified and localized. The information revolution and artificial intelligence are blossoming, while the monopolistic power of writing is rapidly declining. From now on, it will be the world of sound, image, and even touch and smell. In China, people begin to use a lot of pictures, emoji and memes in communication, various means of communication with audio materials and short videos have become more popular. Internet language imposed a shock on classic language, becoming a powerful subversive device for fashion, youth and empathy. Spelling becomes less and less important. What matters is that the recipient can understand it. Instead of being



envious of the sustainability of some words, people hope that their speech can become an instant hit.

Classic literature and traditional ways of writing are losing readers day by day, while various forms of internet literature for fast-moving consumption have become extremely popular – the problem is not that people read less and less, on the contrary, they read more and more, but they have no will to read “noble” texts, and literature in a conventional sense will disappear completely in the long run. There exist no longer literary or non literary languages, but only valid and invalid ones.

Even for the expression of academic viewpoints, their acceptance will be poles apart owing to different technical media. It cannot simply be assumed that serious thoughts will not get attention. Apparently, two trends of China's academic journals are emerging: 1. they are multi-channelized, i.e. simultaneous efforts on paper media, the internet, official accounts, Weibo, audio platforms and short video platforms; 2. they are media-savvy, i.e. journals of humanities and social sciences that are paying attention increasingly to timeliness and levels of concern when selecting topics, soliciting contributions, publicizing or marketing.

Classic writings' loss of their noble status is closely correlated with a technological assault on the powerful standing of authors. Language is the communication tool among people, while the hierarchy of power between people has shaped the opposition between indoctrination and self-expression. The voice of the powerful is far-reaching, their words imply listening and obedience by others, while the expressions by the powerless often take the form of an unheard monologue or unspoken criticism that cannot be heard by the rulers. From the perspective of language, the highest goal of the internet revolution is the cultural revolution, i.e. a linguistic utopia where everyone can use language freely, communicate equally and fairly, where there is no distinction between author and reader, and the inequity between indoctrination and expression is abandoned. What matters is not what to say, but who is willing to listen to you. Previously readers also wanted to “silence” authors, this age of technology has made it a reality.

The movement against hegemony of English is part of the uprising and also rises in this age. Different from the alphabetic writing of English, Chinese writing is ideographic, which is naturally more closely related to graphics. This could be an important reason why art was developed while music was undeveloped in traditional Chinese culture. In the multi-media age, Chinese language will develop along with the technology trend of the rise of graphic language. The animation *36 Chinese Characters* (1984) provides outstanding evidence: all of its animation elements are Chinese characters. In the academic field, many Chinese scholars have recently called for opposition to the academic hegemony of the English language, including getting rid of the prejudicial faith in English academic journals and objecting to the academic evaluation mechanism that is merely based on SCI and SSCI. And indeed, it would appear that the spread of Chinese culture needs to overcome obstacles and pay a higher price due to the hierarchy of languages and the unwarranted dominance of English.

Within Chinese language, minority languages are also gaining their due strength with the help of technology. According to official statistics there are 55 ethnic minorities other than Han, of which more than 20 have only spoken and not written languages. The development of modern science and technology has not only produced a great challenge to the survival of minority languages, it also provided unprecedented opportunities for



their prosperity. For minority languages without written language, instant audio and video provide an ideal way for the ethnic members who live increasingly apart to learn their mother tongues. Compared with Han, ethnic minorities tend to be good at singing and dancing and have more distinctive cultural characteristics, which provides advantageous conditions for more people to pay attention to the spread of ethnic minority languages and cultures. For example, the fact that Mongolian and Tibetan languages are now popular is related to the popularity of folk songs; Dongba characters have gained a lot of fans because Lijiang has become a well-known tourist attraction on the internet.

The uprising of language will inevitably encounter strong suppression by those in power. In a certain sense, the suppression of TikTok by Trump and his allies signifies the suppression of both, graphic language and Chinese language. It could be expected that more similar conflicts on language will take place in the future. In fact, Trump himself is a representative of the uprising of language in this technological age. He is known for his "Twitter Presidency" and benefitted greatly from the uprising of new language communication technologies against traditional ones. Therefore, he finds himself "suppressed" by the traditional media with whom he never had a smooth relationship.

Even on Twitter and Facebook, Trump and his campaign team have been banned again and again, which demonstrates vividly that though the sphere of language in the technological age is more open and tolerant, it is not an ideal linguistic utopia. In other words, linguistic utopias can be continuously approached, but never actually reached. The power struggle will continue in the sphere of language in the future, whereas the violent component is weakening, and the technical component is strengthening. To avoid the accusation of violation of freedom of speech, a technocratic approach to language will become a main approach in the language power struggle, such as the suppression of newly emerging hybrid internet languages on the grounds of national security. In many cases, however, a technological and thus seemingly technocratic approach to language turns out to be technocratic in name only and not in spirit. For instance, the out-of-control technology of shielding readers and listeners from sensitive or offensive words and the technology of firewalls undermine the goal of social operational efficiency that is advocated by technocracy.

As Orwell said, there is no freedom without free speech. What is the relationship between languages of freedom and technologies of freedom? In the age of artificial intelligence, what is the fate of language in the future? In any case, reflecting on the relationship between language and technology, one cannot ignore the important dimensions of knowledge and power, which are closely related to the future destiny of our human being.

*Yongmou Liu (author), Yingyu Zhu (translator)*