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Linguistic Historiography since 1949

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Modern linguistic study in Taiwan started during the half-century of Japanese colonial rule (1895–1945). Japanese scholars, notably linguists Ogawa Naoyoshi 小川尚義 (1869–1947) and Asai Erin 淺井惠倫 (1895–1969), along with anthropologist Inō Kanori 伊能嘉矩 (1867–1925), laid a strong foundation for the study of languages in Taiwan, especially the Formosan languages. Their work ended in 1949 when the Republic of China government retreated to Taiwan, marking the end of the linguistic work by Japanese scholars on the island.

A new phase of linguistic research began with the relocation of Academia Sinica 中央研究院 in 1949, first to Taoyuan 桃園 in northern Taiwan and later permanently to Nangang 南港 in Taipei. Taiwanese scholars increasingly turned to the West, especially the United States, for academic and scientific advancements. Linguistics in Taiwan, traditionally considered a branch of the humanities, has been significantly influenced by developments in the United States. By the late 20th century, Taiwanese linguists – many with postgraduate and doctoral training from US universities – advocated for the establishment of linguistics as an independent discipline within Taiwan's National Science and Technology Council 國家科學及技術委員會 (NSTC). At the time of writing (2025), linguistics is one of the most vibrant academic fields in Taiwan, encompassing subdisciplines across humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

Important Linguists in the Early Years

In the winter of 1948, among Academia Sinica researchers who relocated to Taiwan were two prominent linguists Tung T'ung-ho 董同龢 (1911–1963) and Chou Fa-kao 周法高 (1915–1994). Both trained in traditional Chinese

philology and modern Saussurean structuralist linguistics, they conducted research at the Institute of History and Philology 歷史語言研究所 and taught in the Chinese literature department of National Taiwan University 國立臺灣大學 (NTU).

Tung was primarily a phonologist, contributing to the study of Chinese phonology, Southern Min 閩南 dialects, and the Formosan language Tsou. Chou, primarily a grammarian, taught at Yale University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong 香港中文大學, NTU, and Tunghai University 東海大學. His extensive research focused on archaic Chinese grammar and writing.

English-language education played an important role in the development of linguistics in Taiwan. Two key figures in this area were Liang Shih-chiu 梁實秋 (1903–1987) and Lin Yu-keng 林瑜鏗 (1910–2005). Liang, though better known for his work in English literature and translation and the compilation of English-Chinese dictionaries, significantly influenced language education, teaching English at National Taiwan Normal University 國立臺灣師範大學 (NTNU) from 1949 to 1966. Lin, who earned an MA in linguistics from the University of Michigan in 1950, taught English and general linguistics at NTNU from 1951 for over half a century. The foundation laid by the two language educators was crucial in establishing NTNU's English department as a center for linguistic studies in Taiwan.

Another influential linguist during this period was German scholar Franz Giet 齊德芳神父 (1902–1993), based at Fu Jen Catholic University 輔仁大學 in Taipei. He earned a doctoral degree in linguistics from Bonn University in 1949 with a dissertation on northern Chinese dialects. After arriving in Taiwan in 1963 to help with the reestablishment of Fu Jen University in Taipei, he founded the university's Graduate Institute of Western Languages 西洋語文研究所 in 1969, renamed the Graduate Institute of Linguistics 語言學研究所 in 1972. The founding of the institute is an important landmark in the history of Taiwanese linguistics.

First-Generation Taiwanese Linguists

Modern linguistics did not really take root in Taiwan until the 1970s, when the first generation of Taiwanese linguists with PhDs mostly from universities in the United States entered Taiwan's academia. Four key scholars from this generation were Paul Jen-kuei Li 李壬癸, Tang Ting-chi 湯廷池, Huang Shuanfan 黃宣範, and James H. Y. Tai 戴浩一, who played a major role in shaping the landscape of Taiwanese linguistics in the 1970s and beyond.

Paul Jen-kuei Li is widely recognized as the father of Formosan linguistics. He studied at NTNU under Lin Yu-keng and later at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa with Li Fang-kuei 李方桂. His extensive research on Formosan languages, highlighting their distinctive features, has been instrumental in supporting the "out-of-Taiwan" model of Austronesian expansion. He also designed the fundamentals of the writing systems for 15 Formosan languages, which were adopted by Taiwan's government in 1992. In 1986, he became the founding director of the Graduate Institute of Linguistics 語言學研究所 at National Tsing Hua University 國立清華大學, the first such institute in a Taiwanese national university.

When Li joined Academia Sinica in 1970, he was the only linguist in Taiwan specializing in Austronesian languages. Many later scholars in this field, including Elizabeth Zeitoun 齊莉莎 and Lillian M. Huang 黃美金, were inspired or trained by him, making Taiwan one of the most prominent centers for Austronesian studies in the world.

Tang Ting-chi was undoubtedly instrumental in introducing the Chomskyan paradigm to Taiwan, applying the principles of generative grammar to the analysis of Taiwan Mandarin, Taiwan Southern Min, and Japanese and influencing generations of students, thus elevating Taiwanese syntacticians to the international level and also making formal syntax one of the most visible and successful subdisciplines in Taiwanese linguistics. By the 1970s, cognitive semantics and cognitive functional grammar had emerged as alternatives to the Chomskyan paradigm in the United States, and these approaches have since gained momentum in Taiwan.

Huang Shuanfan earned a PhD at Ohio State University in 1969 and returned to Taiwan in the early 1970s. An advocate of cognitive and functional linguistics, he first taught at NTU's department of foreign languages and literature and in 1994 founded and headed NTU's Graduate Institute of Linguistics 臺大語言學研究 His translation

of Charles N. Li and Sandra Thompson's 1982 book *Mandarin Chinese: A Functional Reference Grammar* into Chinese in 1992 is a landmark in the development of functional linguistics in Taiwan. After the lifting of martial law in 1987, Huang delved into sociolinguistics, publishing the seminal book *Yuyan, shehui yu zuqun yishi* 語言、社會與族群意識 (Language, Society, and Ethnic Identity) in 1993. This work paved the way for further research into sociopolitical and geographical distribution of Taiwan Mandarin and Indigenous languages and their respective speaker populations. He later pioneered the application of the cognitive-functionalist framework to the analysis of Formosan languages.

James H. Y. Tai returned to Taiwan in 1995 to establish the Graduate Institute of Linguistics 語言學研究所 at National Chung Cheng University 國立中正大學 (CCU) in Chiayi 嘉義 in southern Taiwan. Tai expanded psycholinguistic research, integrating cognitive psychology, neurolinguistics, and the philosophy of mind to study Chinese cognitive grammar and also classifier systems in Taiwan Southern Min and Hakka 客語. In 2000, he began pioneering research on Taiwan Sign Language 臺灣手語. CCU is now Taiwan's most important center for sign language research.

Linguistic Institutions and Associations

The 1970s saw the establishment of Taiwan's first graduate institute of linguistics at Fu Jen University. The Graduate Institute of Linguistics at National Tsing Hua University followed in 1986, marking the beginning of the discipline's expansion in the 1990s as a new generation of scholars entered academia. National Chengchi University 國立政治大學 (NCCU), NTU, and CCU established their graduate institutes of linguistics in 1993, 1994, and 1995, respectively. In 2010, Fu Jen's linguistics institute was merged into the Graduate Institute of Cross-Cultural Studies 跨文化研究所.

Scholars at Academia Sinica's Institute of Linguistics 語言學研究所 have made important contributions to Taiwan's linguistic historiography. Among them, Paul Jen-kuei Li has been a leading figure in Austronesian linguistics; Cheng Chin-Chuan 鄭錦全 has contributed to phonology, historical linguistics, and computational linguistics; Ting Pang-hsin 丁邦新 was a historical phonologist and Chinese grammarian; Ho Dah-an 何大安 was a specialist on historical Chinese phonology, Sinitic dialectology, and Austronesian linguistics; while Tseng Chiu-yu 鄭秋豫 has focused on phonetics, phonology, speech corpora, and computational linguistics.

Taiwan's Association for Computational Linguistics and Chinese Language Processing 中華民國計算語言學學會 (ACLCLP) was established in 1990, followed by the Taiwan Languages and Literature Society 臺灣語文學會 (TLLS) in 1991 and the Linguistic Society of Taiwan 臺灣語言學學會 (LST) in 1999. The LST has since become one of the most active linguistic societies in Asia.

The NSTC remains the largest funding body for academic research in Taiwan, with occasional support from other governmental and private agencies. The number of linguistic research projects funded annually by the NSTC grew rapidly from the 1990s, rising from fewer than 100 to over 300 around 2010. However, funding has declined since, dropping to just above 200 research projects funded in 2020. This trend reflects an increasing allocation of multiyear grants to senior researchers and a reduction in university teaching positions due to Taiwan's declining birth rate.

Professional Linguistics Journals

The development of professional linguistics journals is another sign of the academic growth of Taiwanese linguistics. After Academia Sinica's move to Taiwan, its *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 (Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology), originally launched in 1928, resumed publication in 1950. *Qinghua xuebao* 清華學報 (Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies), founded in 1924, restarted from volume 1 in 1956. *Hanxue yanjiu* 漢學研究 (Chinese Studies), the official publication of the Center for Chinese Studies 漢學研究中心 under the National Central Library 國家圖書館, began in 1983. These journals frequently publish articles on linguistics, especially within the domain of Chinese philology.

In 1996, *Zhongwen jisunji yuyanxue qikan* 中文計算語言學期刊 (International Journal of Computational Linguistics and Chinese Language Processing) was launched as the official journal of the ACLCLP, and the TLLS started its *Taiwan yuwen yanjiu* 臺灣語文研究 (Journal of Taiwanese Languages and Literature) in 2003.

Taiwan's first professional journal dedicated to general linguistics, *Yuyan ji yuyanxue* 語言暨語言學 (*Language and Linguistics*; L&L), was launched in 2000 under the guidance of Academia Sinica's Institute of Linguistics. In 2003, the Graduate Institute of Linguistics of NCCU launched *Taiwan yuyanxue qikan* 臺灣語言學期刊 (Taiwan Journal of Linguistics; TJL), an open access journal. The following year, NTNU's English department launched *Tongxinyuan: yuyanxue yanjiu* 同心圓：語言學研究 (*Concentric: Studies in Linguistics*; ConSL). Among these journals, only TJL remains independent, while L&L and ConSL are now published by the commercial publisher John Benjamins.

Linguistic Subdisciplines

After 1949, several major linguistic subdisciplines emerged in Taiwan. Studies in Chinese philology have focused on phonology, the structure-sound-meaning relationship in scripts, the semantic analysis of archaic texts, and the investigation of dialects and minority languages. At the same time, localized linguistic research gained traction. Historical linguistics has examined language change in Taiwan Mandarin, Taiwan Southern Min, and Hakka, as well as linguistic aspects of literary texts and the historical development of ethnic migration and language contact. These languages also occupy an important place in dialectology research, which explores the formation, development, interrelationships, and geographical distribution of dialects.

Alongside philology, research on the internal aspects of language is recognized as the core of general linguistics. Studies of phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics/discourse analysis examine languages synchronically and diachronically to understand linguistic properties, patterns, and underlying mechanisms. Taiwan Mandarin is the most commonly studied language, while research on Austronesian languages has primarily focused on phonetic and structural analyses.

A substantial portion of sociolinguistic research is related to Taiwan Southern Min, Hakka, and English, with English playing a prominent role in Taiwan's formal education system. Geolinguistics, the study of the geographical distribution of languages and linguistic variations, has a long tradition in Taiwan, beginning with Ogawa Naoyoshi's 1907 language map of Taiwan. Landmark publications in this field include Ang Uijin's 洪惟仁 (b. 1946) *Taiwan yuyan dituji* 臺灣語言地圖集 (Language Atlas of Taiwan; 2019), *Minnan diqu fangyan dituji* 閩南地區方言地圖集 (Dialectal Atlas of Southern Min; 2021), and *Taiwan xibu diqu fangyan dituji* 臺灣西部方言地圖集 (Dialectal Atlas of Western Taiwan; 2025).

Social Involvement and Impact

Historically, Taiwanese linguists have had less influence on language policies and language-related social issues than on scholarly research. This was partly due to Taiwan's political history: after Japanese rule (1895–1945), the Kuomintang 國民黨 (KMT, Chinese Nationalist Party) government imposed martial law for 40 years. The 228 Incident 二二八事件 in 1947 and the subsequent White Terror 白色恐怖 stifled intellectual and linguistic research. Meanwhile, the KMT's National Language Policy 國語政策 mandated Mandarin (*guoyu* 國語) as the sole language of instruction in schools, effectively suppressing all of the Indigenous languages and other local languages.

After the lifting of martial law in 1987, and especially following the first democratic transfer of power in 2000, linguists became increasingly involved in efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages. Between 1999 and 2002, linguist Tsao Feng-fu 曹逢甫 was appointed head of the Mandarin Promotion Council 國語推行委員會 under the Ministry of Education 教育部 (MOE), where he initiated language policy reform and promoted Indigenous languages use. Robert Liang-Wei Cheng 鄭良偉, a linguist from the University of Hawai'i, reinterpreted *guoyu* in a more pluralistic sense and renamed the English translation of the council's name as the National Languages Committee in 2003. Cheng's advocacy for linguistic equality culminated in the enactment of the Development of National Languages Act 國家語言發展法 in 2019. In 2021, the MOE awarded Tsao with the Lifetime Contribution to the Promotion of

Indigenous Languages Award 終身貢獻獎, and the LST received recognition from the Council of Indigenous Peoples 原住民族委員會 for its work in promoting Indigenous languages.

In the late 1990s, Taiwan was involved in a highly politicized debate over the national romanization system. The two competing systems were *Hanyu pinyin* 漢語拼音 and *Tongyong pinyin* 通用拼音. Linguists were deeply divided, mirroring political divisions. The controversy led to the removal of Minister of Education Ovid Jyh-Lang Tzeng 曾志朗 in 2002 due to his support for *Hanyu pinyin*. Since then, Taiwan has adopted multiple romanization systems.

Language policy has also been a focus of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party 民主進步黨 governments. Under Presidents Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁 (2000–2008) and Tsai Ying-wen 蔡英文 (2015–2024), efforts were made to promote English as an official language. Initially, most linguists remained indifferent, but in 2018 the LST and the TLLS joined forces and held public forums in Taipei, Taitung 臺東, and Tainan 臺南 to criticize this policy on both moral and technical grounds. In response, the government abandoned the slogan “English as a second official language” 英語第二官方語言 and introduced a revised policy: “2030 Bilingual Nation” 2030 雙語國家. Meanwhile, some linguists have promoted bilingual education in Taiwan Southern Min-Mandarin and Hakka-Mandarin as an alternative approach.

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