

The Linguistic Inquiries of a Chinese Pragmaticist: In Memory of Professor Yan Huang

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Abstract

Yan Huang was a world-renowned Chinese linguist who was educated in mainland China and went abroad after the Reform and Opening Up. Over the past three decades, he, as a leading pragmaticist, had relentlessly expounded the neo-Gricean theory, and his study of anaphor in particular had enormously enriched and expanded the classical Gricean theory. This paper mainly explores his intellectual career as a linguist and particularly a pragmaticist. His academic insights and reflections may shed light on the linguistic inquiries of language students, teachers and researchers, especially young scholars.

Keywords

Yan Huang, intellectual career, linguistic studies, pragmatics

Introduction

Yan Huang was an eminent Chinese linguist who went abroad from the mainland China after the Reform and Opening Up, and a well-known scholar in the field of international pragmatics. He was admitted to the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of Nanjing University in 1977 and became the first cohort of undergraduate students after the Cultural Revolution in China. After receiving a master's degree in linguistics from Nanjing University in 1984, he went abroad to study in the UK. He was enrolled in Trinity College at Cambridge University. He studied pragmatics with Stephen Levinson, an internationally renowned pragmaticist. After receiving his Ph.D. from Cambridge University in 1989, he had taught for almost twenty years at several British universities, including Cambridge University, Oxford University and the University of Reading. After that, he had long served as Professor of Linguistics and Head of the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Professor Huang is a leading figure in neo-Gricean Theory and his research interests are in pragmatics, semantics and syntax. He is an authority of anaphora research, especially well-known for the pragmatics-semantics and pragmatics-syntax interface studies of anaphora.

In the early summer of 2013, Professor Yan Huang was invited to deliver lectures at Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU). At that time, I, one of the authors of this article, was doing my postdoctoral research with Professor Guohua Chen at the National Research Center of Foreign Language Education of BFSU. Professor Chen introduced me to Professor Huang. They had known each other as early as Huang studied at Cambridge. In June of the year 2013, Professor Huang gave a speech entitled "My Road to Linguistic Inquiries" to the faculty and students of BFSU. The speech was a great success, full of insights and inspirations. After the

speech, with the consent and support of Professor Huang, I planned to write an article to provide an overview of his intellectual career (i.e. linguistic inquiries) based on the recordings of the speech as well as his publications and other related materials. However, the plan was postponed again and again by many other jobs. Unfortunately, Professor Yan Huang passed away in Cambridge, England on the 18th of October, 2022. It saddened me greatly but also reminded me of the unfinished task that I once promised him to do. Now we have revised the original draft and produced this new version. It should be noted that this paper is not intended to provide a thorough review of Huang's outstanding academic achievements in linguistics and pragmatics in particular; rather, we would like to explore his way of doing linguistic research and how he has made such an enormous success in the hope of shedding light on the linguistic inquiries of language teachers and researchers, especially those young scholars and students who are still struggling with their linguistic pursuit.

Early Family Education and Language Learning

Yan Huang, whose parents were natives of Ningbo, Zhejiang Province of China, was born in Qingdao, Shandong Province in 1955. His family moved to Danyang County, Jiangsu Province in 1964 when he was only a nine-year-old boy. He was born of a family of highly-civilized Chinese intellectuals. His grandfather was graduated from Columbia University in the United States in his early years, and his grandmother was also quite open-minded and well-read in ancient Chinese poetry and other classics. His aunt is called Su Qing, a woman writer with the same fame as Zhang Ailing (or Eileen Chang) in the literary circle of Shanghai in the 1940s. She had studied in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Central University in Nanking, China. Huang recalled, "When I was a child, I liked reading letters home. Most letters were usually very boring just like journal accounts, but there were two relatives whose letters were extremely well-written. One was Aunt Su, whose letters were written like storytelling. The other was one of my uncles-in-law who was a famous historian. His letters were also written like telling ancient Chinese stories." Growing up in such a big well-educated family, the little boy cultivated his curiosity for language and knowledge.

Huang's mother had taught at the Foreign Languages Institute of the People's Liberation Army, who was very familiar with both Chinese and Western cultures. Under the guidance of his mother, Huang started to learn English early in his childhood and kept writing diaries in English until he graduated from high school. His mother paid great attention to his grammar because she strongly believed that the writings should firstly be correct and then authentic. Whenever he made a mistake, his mother would immediately point out that it was wrong. With his mother's strict requirements, he had a very good command of grammar. At that time, he liked reading a journal called *English Learning*. After so many years, Huang was still capable of recalling exactly the content of the journal: "In 1964, there was an article about the Vietnam War, which quoted the following lines from the poem "March to Longxi" by Chen Tao, a poet of the Tang Dynasty: 'Those forlornly unburied bones of the soldiers are piled along the Wuding River/Whose lovers are still dreaming of their coming home.' It suggests that the U.S. troops sent to Vietnam will be just cannon fodder. The English translation in that journal article impressed me greatly!"

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Huang was still a primary school student. He said that when he was in middle school, there were two main courses: one was "Basics of Industry" and the other "Basics of Agriculture." Apparently, the course for Basics of Industry is about the teaching of basic knowledge of industry while the course for Basics of Agriculture is about the teaching of basic knowledge of agriculture. "In that period, few students of my generation had the opportunity to sit down reading books," he said. "My father once said bitterly, 'It's

absurd to claim that schooling is useless. There is nothing wrong with schooling and you must study hard.” At that time, books were scarcely available. Fortunately, there were many books surviving in their house. With the earnest admonition of his father, the young man read eagerly and widely, which not only laid a solid foundation for his later study but also largely expanded his vision.

In 1973, just one year after graduation from high school, Yan Huang went to work in the countryside because Chairman Mao called on the educated young people to go to the countryside to be reeducated by the poor and lower-middle peasants. During the five years staying in the countryside, he has done a lot of jobs, including being a substitute teacher in primary and middle schools as well as a temporary worker in chemical plants. Specifically, he had taught mathematics and English in a rural senior high school in a county in Jiangsu Province, where he taught himself Japanese and French and also finished a manuscript about the commonly-used English idioms and phrases. Huang said, not without pride, “When I worked in the countryside, I read widely and wrote a pamphlet called *Common English Idioms and Phrases*. I sent it to Shanghai People’s Publishing House but they replied politely that although I had done a good job there was a similar book which was already under publication. Nonetheless, it’s very kind of them to have sent me a big parcel full of the latest English reading materials which were very precious to me at that time.”

After the smash of the Gang of Four in 1976, the college entrance examination system was restored in China in 1977. Huang said: “On hearing the news, I was still working in a chemical factory and I didn’t believe that my family background could allow me to go to college. My parents also suggested that I not take the exam and go to find a new job instead.” In order to realize his college dream, he however, without any hesitation signed up to participate in the college entrance examination. The 1977 college entrance examination was run independently by each province. The candidates in Jiangsu Province took two rounds of examination, one on the local level and the other on the provincial level. Huang successfully passed the two rounds of examination due to the fact that he never gave up the pursuit of knowledge and kept on self-study. Ultimately he was admitted to the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures of Nanjing University and became the first cohort of college students after the Cultural Revolution in China.

College Education and Early Linguistic Studies in China

The young man took to life at university like a duck to water. Recalling the life at Nanjing University, Huang said excitedly: “The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Nanjing University was among the best in China in those days. It had many distinguished professors, including Professor Cunzhong Fan who was the Vice President of Nanjing University and Professor Jia Chen who was the Dean of our Department. Those professors laid great emphasis on English writing since they thought that the writing ability is crucial for students at such a prestigious university.” He also mentioned that his English pronunciation was not good enough at the beginning because his English was almost self-taught. It was not until entering Nanjing University that he had touched on any tape recorder. Therefore, he cherished the hard-won opportunity greatly and studied assiduously.

When he was going to finish his undergraduate study, he had an opportunity to go abroad for further study. In 1981, Professor Nai-tung Ting, a Chinese American scholar, visited Nanjing University. He appreciated Huang’s talent and recommended him to further his study in the United States. With his help, Huang won a graduate scholarship from Western Illinois University. However, he had to give it up since it was still difficult for individuals to study

abroad at the very beginning of the Reform and Opening Up of China. Early in 1982, Huang was graduated with honors from Nanjing University. His thesis is an analysis of Shakespeare's dramas from the perspective of M.A.K. Halliday's cohesion theory. After that, he started his graduate study in English linguistics at Nanjing University, supervised by Professor Tianshi Lv. Thus he became one of the earliest graduate students after the Cultural Revolution.

Since then, Yan Huang had gradually embarked on his career of linguistic research. He said, "After 1979, the academic journals in the field of linguistics and foreign language teaching have been launched or revived one after another. I went to buy and read them. At first, I felt that those articles were all well written. However, just as the Chinese proverb goes, 'newborn calves are not afraid of tigers.' Gradually I became confident that I might well write an academic article. Thus I started writing." As a matter of fact, he published an article entitled "Comments on English Quotations" in the journal *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* as early as 1980. Thereafter, he had published over twenty articles in Chinese academic journals from 1980 to 1985. He also published serial articles on the usage of common English idioms and phrases in *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools* (FLTS), which were finally collected and published by Fujian Education Press under the title of *Common English Idioms and Phrases* in 1985. He said modestly that those articles looked quite naive at present. Then, he added humorously: "I was quite famous at the University because I was a rich man at that time—the staff in the University Post Office all knew that I would receive a money order sent by the publishers nearly every month."

Moreover, Huang had actively participated in academic conferences. In June, 1983, he participated in the "Generative Grammar Symposium" held at Heilongjiang University, Harbin, China. He served successfully as a provisional interpreter for Henk van Riemsdijk, the then chairman of GLOW (Generative Linguistics in the Old World). He also attended the "Systemic Grammar Workshop" presided by M.A.K. Halliday, one of the main founders of Systemic Functional Linguistics. It was hosted by Beijing Foreign Studies University from September 12 to October 29, 1983. (Huang 1984; Sui & Huang 1985) He said, "At that meeting, Professor Zhuanglin Hu from Peking University was very kind to introduce me to the distinguished professors Guozhang Xu and Funing Li." When mentioning Professor Hu, Huang was full of gratitude. He said that he submitted his application for graduation after two years of graduate study. However, the postgraduate education system was then newly established in China and the requirement for the duration of study was three years for a master's degree. Consequently, the Ministry of Education as well as the University Authority was very strict with the assessment. He said proudly, "In order to guarantee the quality, they invited Professor Hu to review my MA thesis. Professor Hu and other members of the committee thought highly of my thesis. Therefore, my application for graduation was ultimately approved by the University as well as the Ministry of Education." It paved the way for Huang's upcoming overseas study.

Theoretical Linguistic and Pragmatic Training Abroad

Yan Huang got ahead of most of the Chinese young men of his generation in going abroad for further study, especially for linguistics. He had written to the well-known grammarian Randolph Quirk (founder of the Survey of English Usage) to enquire about the PhD program at University College, London (UCL). Quirk, who was appointed as Vice-Chancellor of the University of London (1981-1985), recommended him to his former student, Sidney Greenbaum, who just succeeded to the post of Quain Professor of English Language and Literature and director of the Survey of English Usage in 1983, which Quirk had vacated. Although he was accepted by the University of London, yet there was no scholarship in the first year of graduate study before he passed the qualification examination. Fortunately, he was

granted a scholarship by the University of Cambridge—he was among the first cohort of Chinese students to win a scholarship to Cambridge University after the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution. Huang left China for U.K. in November, 1984. In the following years, he studied in the Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages, at Cambridge University.

There, Huang studied with world-renowned linguists such as John Lyons, Peter Matthews and Nigel Vincent. (Huang 1987) He said that Sir John Lyons became the Master of Trinity Hall, Cambridge in 1984. He was a highly respected gentleman, who was benevolent towards students. Peter Matthews was formerly Head of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Cambridge (1980-2000) and Praelector of St John's College (1987-2001). He was an inspiring teacher, who was always ready to support younger scholars and learners. He was a kind and humorous man. Yan Huang completed his PhD under Stephen C. Levinson, who later became President of International Pragmatics Association. He said that Stephen is a man with great wisdom, whose work is world-class in several fields. His research on politeness (with Penelope Brown) is influential in the fields of linguistics and anthropology, and his recent study on language and space is also widely recognized, not to mention his contributions to pragmatics. Huang said: "Being his student, I enjoyed talking with him, whose words often enlightened me on the questions which had been perplexing me for a long time. Generally, I went to see him every two or three weeks, or maybe longer. We often met at a bar having a drink and a casual chat. I have learned from him that a good mentor is to help you figure out in which direction to go and how to overcome obstacles in the process of problem-solving." He said gratefully, "From the countryside to Nanjing University, it was the first time for me to broaden my horizons, and from Nanjing University to Cambridge University, it was the second time for me to further expand my vision."

With the help of these distinguished professors, the young man quickly reached the frontiers in modern linguistics. He gradually showed his extraordinary talent for linguistics and pragmatics in particular. According to Huang, after Noam Chomsky developed his theory of government and binding in the early 1980s, the phenomenon of anaphora increasingly became a hot topic in generative grammar. The Italian linguist Luigi Rizzi, one of Chomsky's former students, explored the phenomenon of pro-drop by comparative studies of Italian and English. His study has brought about a revolution within generative grammar, which is called "New Comparative Syntax." The bulk of research on anaphora in various languages has been done from the perspective of syntax. After discussing with his supervisor Stephen Levinson, Huang decided to examine the phenomenon of anaphora in Chinese from the perspective of pragmatics. As for choosing this topic, he explained: "At that time, there were few articles approaching anaphora from the perspective of pragmatics since it was widely recognized as a syntactical issue. Levinson and I intended to investigate whether we could address the issue in the way of pragmatics."

It proved that this choice was sensible. Each year, the colleges at Cambridge University provide Junior Research Fellowships for those promising young scholars, that is, usually those who are at the end of their third or fourth year of doctoral research. The Research Fellowship provides an opportunity to spend three (or four) years in Cambridge undertaking research at an early stage of an academic career. Research Fellows normally obtain their doctorates during the early stage of their Research Fellowship, and move on to pursue post-doctoral research. The fellowship is highly competitive. The candidates should be able to demonstrate their exceptional talent. In December, 1987, Yan Huang was successfully elected and became a Junior Research Fellow of Churchill College. He was the second postgraduate student after

Andrew Radford (a famous generative grammarian) from the Department of Linguistics who won a junior research fellowship of Churchill College. During this period, he revised and polished his doctoral thesis, which laid a good foundation for its publication by Cambridge University Press. Huang said: “This system is very necessary. It will surely promote your research interests and broaden your research horizons. Many great scholars, including the Nobel laureates, all said that the position was helpful at the later stages of their academic careers.”

Due to his excellent work, his thesis was passed without restrictions. Thus Yan Huang received the PhD degree in linguistics from Cambridge University in 1989. His doctoral thesis was titled “Anaphora in Chinese: Towards a Pragmatic Analysis.” One significant contribution of his thesis to theoretical linguistics is having applied the Gricean pragmatic theory to a traditionally considered syntactic issue. Levinson commented that the thesis tried to have completed two tasks at once: one was to challenge Chomskyan syntax, and the other to develop the Gricean pragmatic theory. As his examiner, Peter Matthews spoke highly of Huang’s thesis, claiming that it was publishable and promised to recommend it to Cambridge University Press. However, John Lyons had a different view. He said to Huang, “I was told that your thesis is well-done but you don’t have to publish it too quickly. You might put it away and revise it two or three years later. You will probably have new ideas.” Huang said emotionally that this adequately showed the rigorousness of a senior British scholar.

Pragmatic Interface Studies: From Anaphora to General Pragmatics

Shortly after his graduating, his supervisor Stephen Levinson left Cambridge University. Yan Huang was invited to teach the postgraduate course Pragmatics in the Department of Linguistics at Cambridge University. At the same time, Professor Lyons, a world-renowned semanticist, taught semantics in the University. It was really a great challenge for Huang to teach such a course. However, it proved a success. Two years later, Yan Huang applied for a teaching position at Oxford University. He said: “Interestingly, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) of the British Government sent a letter enquiring about my eligibility for a teaching position in the Linguistics Department of the University. It was replied that strictly speaking the teaching job was not about English linguistics but syntax and pragmatics. Thus I taught at Oxford.” There, he was greatly influenced by Anna Morpurgo-Davies, Professor of Comparative Philology. He said: “Anna was a world-renowned luminary, who became a professor in her early thirties. She was frequently invited to deliver lectures at the universities worldwide, including Harvard and Yale. Over the decades, she had worked diligently. At first, I was in the same college with her and her office was opposite mine. I often left my office around 12 o’clock at night but the light was still on in her office.” It is worth mentioning that Yan Huang was also awarded a DPhil at the University of Oxford in 1993. Years later, he moved to the University of Reading where he became Professor of Theoretical Linguistics. Finally, he moved to New Zealand in 2008 and was Professor of Linguistics and Head of the Department of Applied Language Studies and Linguistics (now School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics) in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Auckland.

Huang’s lasting research interest was in pragmatics, and particularly in anaphora. He advanced greatly neo-Gricean pragmatic theory in the field of theoretical pragmatics. He got his first book *The Syntax and Pragmatics of Anaphora* published in Cambridge University Press in 1994. This is a revised and improved version of his doctoral thesis. Although it mainly focuses on a pragmatic analysis of Chinese anaphora, the monograph has already involved anaphora in more than 70 languages. The publication of this book was internationally acclaimed. William S.Y. Wang, an eminent Chinese American linguist, particularly wrote him a letter of

congratulations. His second book, *Anaphora: A Cross-Linguistic Study*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2000. This book apparently far exceeds the first one in both breadth and depth though it still concentrates on a pragmatic study of anaphora. It not only makes great contributions to neo-Gricean pragmatic theory of anaphora but also enormously enlarges the data to cover anaphora in more than 550 languages in the world. When asked how he had collected such big linguistic data, Huang replied as follows. He usually made references to the grammar books and academic journals of those languages. Sometimes, he consulted the experts in a particular language. Besides, the international students were often ideal informants of their native languages. This book is considered one of the most thorough and authoritative works on anaphora. (Li 2006: 358)

Having published two books on anaphora, Yan Huang planned to write a textbook on pragmatics. He said: “After publishing these two books, I realized that I had been doing research on anaphora for over two decades and that I had not paid enough attention to the major issues of pragmatics. Therefore, I decided first to turn to the fundamental issues that are now being debated in pragmatics though I was still keeping a strong interest in anaphora. My first goal was to write a textbook.” Actually, there are already many textbooks in pragmatics, among which Levinson’s *Pragmatics* (1983) is a classic. Just as Huang (2013: 130) pointed out, “The publication of Levinson’s celebrated *Pragmatics* in 1983 systematized the field of pragmatics and marked the coming of age of pragmatics as a linguistic discipline in its own right.” However, as one of the most vibrant and rapidly growing fields in linguistics, the landscape of pragmatics had changed tremendously by 2000 when Huang set out to write a new textbook of pragmatics. In 2007, his textbook *Pragmatics* was published by Oxford University Press. To quote Huang (2013: 130) again, this book “[covers] the representative research areas in contemporary pragmatics and present[s] an authoritative and up-to-date description of the contemporary landscape of pragmatics, in the hope that it will help shape the development of the discipline in the next decade or so.” Notably, conversation analysis is removed from the book, which makes the whole book more consistent. (Lin & Lin 2007: 313; Zhang 2008: 217) For this, Huang explained that the central topics of inquiry in the Anglo-American tradition (i.e., micro-pragmatics), including implicature, presupposition, speech acts, deixis, and reference, all originate in the 20th century analytic philosophy while conversation analysis grows out of micro-sociology, particularly, ethnomethodology, which belongs to the Continental tradition, or rather macro-pragmatics. (Huang 2007: 2; 2013: 131, 148) What’s more, the textbook is mindful of its student audience, with extensive study questions for each chapter and a glossary at the end of the book. This book, unlike many textbooks which usually cite examples from English, draws on data from a wide range of the world’s languages. Since its publication, the book is very popular with students and it has been taken as a textbook in many universities all over the world. Professor Wu Yi’an from Beijing Foreign Studies University comments: “His textbook is among the few that are wholeheartedly written for postgraduates, researchers and ordinary readers, guiding them through the doorway into pragmatics.” So far the book has been translated into Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Malay and other languages.

After the completion of *Pragmatics*, Huang began to write *The Oxford Dictionary of Pragmatics*. It was started in 2006 and finally published in 2012. He said that these kinds of books are easily outdated after they are written. Consequently, it is usually necessary to revise and update them in time. In 2014, the second edition of his *Pragmatics* was published. Then, he edited *The Oxford Handbook of Pragmatics* in 2017. Apart from his monographs and other academic books, he had published a large number of articles, reviews, and book chapters. What’s more, he had taught and supervised numerous PhD students, many of whom have

become well-established professors. He started supervising PhD students at the University of Oxford in 1991. Professor Francis Yunqing Lin also took the pragmatics course taught by Yan Huang when he was a Ph.D. student at Oxford University.

Conclusion

Yan Huang is a diligent, rigorous and respected academic with profound knowledge of and great contributions to the subdiscipline of linguistics, pragmatics. More importantly, he is a genuine person with humble demeanor, unflinching kindness and great courtesy in life. As he reflected on his academic career, he repeatedly emphasized the significant role of the following factors for his achievements. First of all, hard work is a necessity of doing research. He said that quality research is like a good wine, which needs brewing durably. In a fast-paced, impetuous society, a real scholar must calm down and work hard—it may take ten years to sharpen your sword—not simply for pursuing fame and wealth. Second, doing research requires a certain talent. An excellent scholar should find out his or her talent in a certain area. Moreover, as the Chinese adage goes, “Learn to be a human being before you learn to do things.” One should aim high but stay grounded—the outstanding research should go an inch wide and a mile deep. He also attributed his success to good fortunes, including China’s Reform and Opening Up, his mother’s love and support, and the help of good teachers. Finally, he always reminded himself of being modest in the pursuit of knowledge. He said that one should be aware of the limits of his knowledge—no matter how much he knows, it is just like a drop of water in the ocean. Besides, he highlighted the importance of maintaining an international vision for academic research. Science knows no country. He strongly encouraged Chinese scholars to publish in English because it is a world language in the academic field.

Huang is not only a scholar with an international vision but also an intellectual with the spirit of Chinese culture. Over the years, he had given a lot of invited talks at various conferences and universities worldwide, and served on the editorial board of many prestigious international journals. Most importantly, he often took advantage of sabbatical leaves, vacations, international conferences and other opportunities to deliver lectures at homeland universities. In his later years, he had increasingly closer ties with the counterparts in the Chinese linguistic circle, especially in pragmatics. He was even made a Changjiang Scholar affiliated with Beijing Foreign Studies University, which is a highly prestigious position in China. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he still maintained active online academic interactions with teachers and students in his homeland. Huang once said humbly: “I hope to write another monograph as the last of my works. By then, I’m afraid I will have retired because to the best of my ability I usually publish a book every six or seven years. Unlike those scholars who can work on several books at the same time, I can only focus on one at a time and try my best to write it well.” Unfortunately, his enterprise was stopped by his passing. He is a great loss to all the people in the linguistic and particularly pragmatic circles both in China and the world. His legacy will be carried on through his students and followers.

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