

Summary

Evaluation reports on seven programs teaching the Chinese language

1, *Chinese Assistant 2.10*, which is currently not available, is an online dictionary providing real-time-translations of words in unknown Chinese texts from three different electronic dictionaries. Moreover it offers database functions. 2, *Chinese Character Tutor* is a vocabulary trainer with many different criteria to sort words and idiomatic phrases for learning purposes. 3, The *professional* version of *Interactive Chinese*, which is meant for beginners, includes many creative and graphic exercises, including animated phonetic descriptions and "edutainment". 4, The ABC version of the program *Interactive Chinese* is smaller, but only exercises of minor importance have been omitted. 5, *Language Learning Chinese* is a program for oversea Chinese children who want to learn Chinese. 6, *Mao's Alphabet* is a free software and includes 2,400 characters which can be trained, tested and looked up in a simple dictionary. 7, *Wenlin 2.0* is designed for the advanced autonomous learner of Chinese. It accepts unknown texts and explains the characters with their etymology in English, reading them out loudly and creating associations by displaying the word field and the frequency of usage. While it stimulates further learning, the exercises for writing and vocabulary learning are rather rudimentary.

Satisfying Curiosity about Chinese with Wenlin Software

Tom Bishop

1. Introduction

Wenlin (文林) is a software package specifically designed to help learners of Chinese. It has been under development since 1987, and has been commercially available since early 1997. The second edition (Wenlin 2.0) was published in November 1998. It has many improvements, including a much larger dictionary – the ABC Chinese-English Dictionary, edited by John DeFrancis, with over 72,000 entries. Wenlin is distributed on a CD-ROM that runs on both Macintosh and IBM-PC computers. It integrates three basic components: (1) a Chinese text editor/viewer; (2) Chinese-English and English-Chinese dictionaries; and (3) "flashcards" for memorizing Chinese characters.

The text editor is integrated with the dictionaries in such a way that one can look up the definition of any vocabulary item in an electronic text simply by pointing to it. We call this capability *Instant Lookup*. It works with practically any Chinese text that is in electronic form, and saves the student from spending a great deal of time trying to look up vocabulary in an ordinary dictionary. Students are therefore able to do extensive reading of texts that would otherwise be too difficult for them.

Wenlin assists the student in a variety of other ways, such as explaining why each Chinese character looks the way it does, displaying the standard stroke order for over ten thousand Chinese characters, and playing the recorded pronunciations of all the syllables of Mandarin.

Rather than give a comprehensive summary of all Wenlin's features, I will focus in this article on two types of cross-referencing, namely, the abilities to view two kinds of list: (1) all the multisyllable words that contain a given character; and (2) all the characters that contain a given graphical component (radical or phonetic). Both kinds of list are ordered by frequency of usage, starting with the most commonly used vocabulary items. These two cross-referencing capabilities were the original main ideas of Wenlin, and I feel that they are still Wenlin's most interesting and distinctive features.

2. First Example: Words Containing a Given Character

A very frequent and frustrating experience for the learner of Chinese is to encounter a character that seems familiar, but to be unable to identify *why* it seems familiar.

Consider the word 志愿 *zhìyuàn* 'aspiration'. It is not a very common word. A student might encounter it in the second or third year. By that time, the student has probably already learned the character 志 *zhì*. But where?

Both 同志 *tóngzhì* and 意志 *yìzhì* are more common than 志愿 *zhìyuàn*. (The basis for this assertion is given later in this article.) Also, 杂志 *zázhì*, though perhaps slightly less common, is often found in first-year textbooks. The student is likely to have learned these related words earlier. Unfortunately, none of them is listed in an ordinary dictionary under the character 志 *zhì*! Therefore, an ordinary dictionary is no help to the student who would like to make an association between this new piece of knowledge (the word 志愿 *zhìyuàn*) and the related knowledge that was already (partially) acquired.

Reviewing the previously encountered words when learning the new word could help all the words to stick more firmly in memory. It might also provide insight into their meanings. For example, 同志 *tóngzhì* 'comrade' could be understood as "(person having the) same aspiration". In this way, the character 志 *zhì* is better understood as a morpheme (meaningful element), rather than an arbitrary symbol for the syllable *zhì*, which could easily be confused with homophonous characters 制, 至, 治, 质, 致, 置, etc.

Wenlin provides a triangular "button" in the dictionary entry of each Chinese character, like this:

▷ list words containing 志 (most common words first)

By pressing the button, the student can immediately see a list of all the words in the dictionary that contain the given character:

同志 *tóngzhì* n. comrade

意志 *yìzhì* n. will; determination

志愿[-願] *zhìyuàn* n. aspiration; wish; ideal ◆ v. pledge to do sth.; volunteer

标志[標-] *biāozhì* n. sign; mark; symbol

杂志[雜-] *zázhì* n. ① magazine; journal; periodical ② records; notes

斗志[鬥-] *dòuzhì* n. will to fight

壮志[壯-] *zhuàngzhì* n. lofty ideal/aspiration

志气[-氣] *zhìqì* n. aspiration; ambition

... (etc.)

The entire list for 志 contains seventy-nine words, so it is very important that the list is arranged in order of frequency of usage (as I will explain below). For review, the student can concentrate on those words near the top of the list, without being distracted by the less common words down below. If some words near the top of the list are still unfamiliar to the student, it may be beneficial for the student to "preview" them in preparation for eventually memorizing them, and also to form a better idea of the meaning of the character/morpheme shared in common by all the words in the list.

3. Frequency Statistics for Chinese Characters and Words

You may wonder whether the claims just made, about some words being more common than others, are facts or only subjective opinions. Then again, if you find the topic of statistics hopelessly boring, and are therefore in danger of not finishing this article, perhaps you should skip this section and go directly to 4. *Second Example: Characters Containing a Given Component.*

Frequency statistics are compiled in a straightforward way: by taking a large sample of "typical" Chinese texts, and counting the number of occurrences of each Chinese character (字 *zì*). The characters are then ranked in order starting with the character with the largest number of occurrences. The same thing can be done with words (词 *cí*); though it is more difficult since the sample texts must first be parsed (divided into words).

Of course, the exact ordering depends on the particular sample texts. Nevertheless, especially for the most common vocabulary, statistics really are meaningful. All studies agree that the first two characters are (1) 的 *de* and (2) 一 *yī*. There is only slight variation in the ordering of the next few characters: (3) 是 *shì*, (4) 不 *bù*, (5) 了 *le*, etc. For less common items, even though the numbers vary more and more widely between different statistical studies, there is still a high degree of approximate consistency. There is a clear distinction, for example, between a character like 水 *shuǐ* that is among the three hundred most frequent characters, and a character like 撰 *zhuàn* that is not included in the two thousand most frequent characters: when designing materials for review by second-year students who may have studied in different schools, one might expect most of the students to be familiar with the former, but not with the latter.

Wenlin's frequency ranks for single characters (字 *zì*) were derived by averaging the data from five different sets of statistics (details are given in Appendix A of the Wenlin User's Guide). *Modern Chinese Frequency Dictionary* (现代汉语频率词典, Beijing Language Institute, 1986) is unusual in counting not only single characters, but also words of any number of syllables, and it is the source of all Wenlin's frequency data for words (词 *cí*).

A strange method of learning Chinese vocabulary that I actually used while living in China was to memorize characters (字 *zì*) in frequency order, and while learning each character, learn (or at least preview) the most common words (词 *cí*) containing that character. Even though I had to spend a lot of time with the frequency dictionary assembling the words to go with each character, I found it to be a good way of learning over 1500 characters in one year.

This method has limitations. For example, when one learns the character 生 *shēng* (number 25), one has not yet learned the character 活 *huó* (number 179). Therefore it is premature to learn the word 生活 *shēnghuó*. It may still be beneficial to "preview" the word 生活 *shēnghuó* when learning 生 *shēng*. Then, later, when learning 活 *huó*, the word 生活 *shēnghuó* may already seem slightly familiar.

In practice, it seems very unlikely that the method just described would be, or should be, followed exactly. Communicative goals and grammatical patterns should also influence the order of vocabulary acquisition. For example, it makes sense to learn the color words 红 *hóng*, 绿 *lǜ*, 蓝 *lán*, etc. as a group, regardless of their frequency rankings. And, of course, one had better learn words of practical importance such as 厕所 *cèsuǒ* before the urgent need for them arises, regardless of how often they occur in literature or conversation. Furthermore, the method works better for the first thousand characters, since they are all so common that an active student is sure to encounter them repeatedly in a variety of contexts soon after learning them. Less common characters become more like number 1999:

1999 葛 [gé] kudzu vine; grass-cloth (pueraria) [Gě] (surname)

Without motivation, such as a kudzu vine growing in the garden or a friend named Gě, learning such a character feels like a waste of time. (On the other hand, number 2000 痕 *hén* as in 痕迹 *hénjì* 'mark' is relatively useful; this may be evidence of inaccuracy of the frequency statistics.)

In spite of these limitations, frequency statistics are valuable as approximations, especially when we take into consideration the fact that a vocabulary item cannot be learned once and for all in a single lesson. Only after repeated exposure will it be retained in long-term memory. Systematic review can be organized using lists of vocabulary ordered by frequency of usage. In any list of vocabulary items arranged in frequency order, a student is very likely to be most familiar with the items near the top of the list, regardless of the exact order in which the student originally learned them.

4. Second Example: Characters Containing a Given Component

The example has already been given of seeing a character (志 *zhì*) in a new word (志愿 *zhìyuàn*) and being unable to remember the other words one has already learned containing the same character. Another experience, which is even more frequent and frustrating, is to encounter a character, one of whose components seems familiar, but to be unable to identify it.

The character 核 *hé* 'pit; nucleus' is not very common. (Its frequency rank is 1378.) It might be learned by a second-year student. The student surely recognizes the left-side component 木 *mù* 'tree' (suggesting the meaning 'fruit', related to 'pit'). But what is the right-side component 亥? It should seem familiar to the student.

With sufficient time and effort, the student might succeed in finding 亥 in an ordinary dictionary. Its pronunciation is *hài*, and the student might be clever enough to realize that it is a phonetic component in 核 *hé*. It is unlikely that the student is already familiar with the word 亥 *hài* meaning 'number twelve; year of the pig'. (The frequency rank of 亥 *hài* is 2873.) It is even more unlikely that the dictionary will inform the student that the character 亥 originally depicted a pig. In any case, the student's real purpose, to discover why the component 亥 *hài* seems familiar, has been frustrated.

Almost certainly the student has already learned the characters 该 *gāi* (frequency rank 339) and 孩 *hái* (420), and quite possibly also 刻 *kè* (665). These characters all contain 亥 *hài* as a component.

Theories of memory indicate that facts are more easily retained when they are linked together by meaningful associations. By reviewing the characters 该 *gāi*, 孩 *hái*, 刻 *kè* and 核 *hé* as a group, the student can remember them more effectively, and reinforce understanding of phonetic components. The relation between the three initial consonants *g*-, *k*-, and *h*- is a pattern; compare 古 *gǔ*, 苦 *kǔ* and 胡 *hú*. Using the phonetic component as a "hint" to help remember (or guess) the pronunciation of a character is a skill without which learning to read Chinese would be nearly impossible.

In the dictionary entry of each Chinese character, Wenlin explains its analysis into components. For example, under 核 *hé* it gives the components 木 *mù* and 亥 *hài*. By pointing to one of the components, the student can then see the dictionary entry for the component. In that entry, Wenlin provides a "button" like this:

▷ list characters containing 亥 as a component

By pressing the button, the student can immediately see a list of all the characters in the dictionary that contain the given component:

该 (F該) [gāi] (应该 yīnggāi) should

孩 [hái] (孩子 háizi, 小孩儿 xiǎoháir) child; 女孩儿 gǚr

刻 [kè] carve; quarter hour; moment

核 [hé] pit; nucleus; 核桃 hétào walnut [hú] 核儿 húr (口) pit

咳 [hāi] hey [kē] 咳嗽 késou cough

... (etc.)

"In a system, every fact is connected with every other fact by some thought-relation. The consequence is that every fact is retained by the combined suggestive power of all the other facts in the system, and forgetfulness is well-nigh impossible." (William James: *Principles of Psychology* vol. 1, 1891, pp. 662-3).

5. Conclusion

The two examples, 志愿 *zhiyuàn* (with words containing 志) and 核 *hé* (with characters containing 亥), may not be especially beautiful, but they are typical of the thousands of words and characters a student has to learn. Achieving a minimal level of literacy in Chinese is a very time-consuming task. It can be made at least slightly more efficient, and quite a bit more interesting, by making cross-referencing between related vocabulary items easier. Then the student can explore how words are built by combining characters, and characters are built by combining components.

Wenlin is intended to maximize the student's appreciation for the analytic structure of Chinese vocabulary and the visual representation of its meaningful elements, while simultaneously minimizing the student's frustration in trying to remember vocabulary items or look them up in dictionaries. Naturally, some students will be more interested than others in exploring the analysis of vocabulary items, and a student's interest will vary over time. Requiring every student to analyse every vocabulary item would be unreasonable. An advantage to using Wenlin as a tool for reading texts and learning characters, is that the student always has the option of satisfying his or her curiosity.

Zusammenfassung

Der Autor gibt einen Einblick in zwei wichtige Funktionen der Chinesisch-Lernsoftware "Wenlin 2.0", mit deren Hilfe der Schriftzeichenerwerb für den Lerner strukturierter und dadurch leichter gemacht werden soll. Zum einen kann das Programm alle Wörter anzeigen, die ein bestimmtes Schriftzeichen enthalten, zum anderen können alle Schriftzeichen angezeigt werden, die eine bestimmte Komponente (Radikal oder Phonetikum) enthalten. Die Sortierung der Listen erfolgt in beiden Fällen nach der statistischen Häufigkeit. So ergeben sich jeweils Gruppen von strukturell ähnlichen Wörtern/Zeichen, die sich der Lerner besser einprägen kann.

Sinologische Qualifizierungsarbeiten an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin und der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin

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1. Allgemeine Situation

Die Sinologie der Berliner Humboldt-Universität hat sich wie an keiner anderen deutschen Universität in den vergangenen Jahrzehnten relativ ausgedehnt der Forschung und der wissenschaftlichen Grundlegung der Lehre auf den verschiedenen Gebieten der modernen und der alten chinesischen Sprache gewidmet. Dafür wurden seit Ende der 50er Jahre, nachdem die ersten Nachkriegsjahrgänge am Ostasiatischen Institut ihr Studium beendet hatten, kontinuierlich und planmäßig durch Qualifizierung interessierter Absolventen die entsprechenden Kapazitäten neu aufgebaut. Bei der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (AdW) erhielten etwa um die gleiche Zeit (seit 1959/60) am Institut für Orientforschung in der Abteilung Ostasien ebenfalls einige linguistisch orientierte Absolventen der Humboldt-Universität sowie chinesischer Universitäten eine Anstellung. Ihre Arbeit erfolgte in fachlicher Abstimmung mit der 1958 gegründeten Sektion für Sinologie, wobei die damals dringend notwendige Erarbeitung eines den aktuellen Bedürfnissen entsprechenden chinesisch-deutschen Wörterbuches im Vordergrund stand. 1969 wurde diese Arbeitsgruppe neben anderen in das neugebildete Zentralinstitut für Sprachwissenschaft (ZISW) überführt.³⁷ Zwischen Universität und Akademie gab es auf dem sinologisch-sprachwissenschaftlichen Gebiet enge Kontakte und Kooperationen.

Der Aufbau der Sinologie und damit der Sinolinguistik in Berlin mußte zunächst von Null beginnen, da als Folge des Krieges kaum noch einschlägig ausgebildete und qualifizierte Fachleute zur Verfügung standen. Nachdem Prof. Eduard Erkes (1891-1958), der den Wiederaufbau des Faches in Leipzig und Berlin Anfang der 50er Jahre geleitet hatte, 1958 verstorben war, charakterisierte der Vizepräsident der Akademie Wolfgang Steinitz Anfang 1959 die Situation als "schwere Kaderlage in der Sinologie". "Ein planmäßiger Universitäts-Unterricht kann seit dem Tode von Gen. Prof. Erkes, Leipzig, nur noch an der Humboldt-Univ. durchgeführt werden, auch da nur mit großen Schwierigkeiten. ... Ratchnevsky und Behrsing sind z. Zt. die einzigen 'fertigen' Universitätslehrkräfte für Sinologie in der DDR", wobei Ratchnevsky "der wissen-

³⁷ Einzelheiten vgl. Richter (1999:345, 354, 359).