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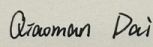
An Analysis of Labiodentalisation in the Chinese and Welsh languages

漢語和威爾士語中的唇齒化分析

Supervisor: Professor Chia-Ning Chu

*Word count:*1050

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English Review

This reflective review evaluates my experience of researching and writing my dissertation on the comparison between labiodentalisation in Chinese and Welsh historical phonology. Rather than focusing on the findings of the dissertation itself, this review reflects on my development as a student and researcher throughout the entire process, including the challenges I encountered, the skills I developed, and the limitations I gradually became aware of during the project.

After taking courses in Chinese phonology, I gradually became interested in cross-linguistic comparisons of sound change. Although different languages possess distinct phonological systems and historical backgrounds, many of them display surprisingly similar patterns of phonetic development. This led me to realise that sound change is often rooted in shared articulatory mechanisms and general principles of articulatory economy common to human speech production. In other words, despite the diversity of languages, human beings ultimately share the same vocal organs and similar tendencies toward ease of articulation in connected speech. While considering possible dissertation topics, I happened to be living in Wales, which inspired me to compare Chinese and Welsh and explore whether the two languages exhibited comparable phonological developments.

At the beginning of the project, my understanding of the research process was relatively simplistic. Since I already possessed some background knowledge in Chinese historical phonology, I initially assumed that the dissertation would mainly involve identifying a similar phonological development in Welsh and then comparing the two systems. I underestimated both the theoretical complexity of historical phonology and the methodological difficulties involved in conducting a meaningful cross-linguistic comparison. As the research progressed, however, I gradually realised that similarities between phonological developments do not necessarily imply identical phonological mechanisms, and that a more theoretically informed analysis would be required.

The first challenge I encountered was my limited knowledge of phonetics. While I had previously studied traditional Chinese phonology, I realised that cross-linguistic phonological analysis required a much stronger understanding of articulatory phonetics and the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). Different languages possess different phonemic inventories and phonetic distinctions, and without a solid grasp of phonetics, it would have been impossible to analyse the sound changes accurately. Consequently, I spent a considerable amount of time learning phonetic terminology, studying articulatory mechanisms, and familiarising myself

with IPA transcription. This process significantly expanded my understanding of how speech sounds are physically produced and how phonological changes can emerge from articulatory processes.

The second major challenge was studying the historical development of Welsh phonology itself. Although learning the pronunciation system of Modern Welsh was relatively manageable, researching the historical development of Welsh sound changes proved much more difficult. Unlike Chinese historical phonology, which benefits from extensive reconstruction systems, databases, and long-established scholarly traditions, Welsh historical phonology required consultation of specialised academic monographs and historical linguistic studies. My university did not have a specialist in Welsh historical phonology whom I could directly consult, which meant that much of my learning had to be conducted independently through reading.

At the beginning of the project, I did not even know which books were considered authoritative in the field of Welsh phonology and Celtic linguistics. In this situation, AI tools became unexpectedly useful. By using AI assistance, I was able to identify several foundational works related to Welsh historical phonology and consonant mutation. However, another practical difficulty soon emerged: many of these books were unavailable electronically and were not held in my university library. Eventually, with the assistance of librarians, I managed to obtain several important texts through interlibrary loan services from other universities. This experience made me realise how important academic support systems and library resources are for independent research. Furthermore, after learning about my research topic, library staff kindly introduced me to a Welsh language tutor, who taught me how to use Welsh dictionaries and linguistic resources more effectively. This support greatly improved my ability to engage with Welsh materials.

Another challenge concerned determining the appropriate scope of the dissertation. Initially, I hoped to compare several different types of sound change between Chinese and Welsh. However, as I read more secondary literature and attempted to organise my chapters, I realised that such a broad comparison would exceed both the word limit and my own level of expertise. I gradually understood that a focused and theoretically coherent analysis would be more effective than attempting to discuss too many phenomena superficially. Consequently, I narrowed the project to a detailed comparison of a single phonological development. In retrospect, this decision significantly improved the clarity and structure of the dissertation.

I also encountered difficulties concerning the relationship between orthography and pronunciation. Chinese historical phonology benefits from extensive reconstruction databases

that allow researchers to trace earlier pronunciations with relative confidence. Welsh, however, presented a different situation. Because orthographic systems often preserve older forms after pronunciation has already changed, it was difficult to determine how certain historical forms may actually have been pronounced. To address this problem, I repeatedly consulted specialised studies on Welsh historical phonology and gradually learned how to infer likely historical pronunciations from linguistic evidence. This process required patience and careful reading, but it also improved my confidence in handling historical linguistic materials.

Throughout the writing process, I frequently struggled with self-confidence. Since this was my first attempt at conducting an extended comparative linguistic study, I often worried that my theoretical understanding was insufficient or that my arguments were not sophisticated enough. Nevertheless, meetings with my supervisor were consistently encouraging and constructive. These discussions reassured me that uncertainty and revision are normal parts of academic research, and they motivated me to continue refining the dissertation instead of abandoning difficult sections.

Overall, this dissertation project has been an extremely valuable academic experience. It deepened my understanding of phonetics, phonology, and historical linguistics, while also exposing me to Welsh linguistic history and Celtic studies. More importantly, the project changed the way I think about language comparison. At the beginning of the dissertation, I primarily focused on identifying surface similarities between sound changes. By the end of the project, however, I had become much more aware of the importance of distinguishing between phonetic mechanisms, phonological systems, and historical developments. I also realised how much more there is for me to learn in the fields of phonetics and historical linguistics. Although this dissertation represents only an introductory exploration of these topics, it has strengthened my interest in future linguistic research and has given me greater confidence in conducting independent academic study.