香港中文大學 CUHK | 語言學及現代語言系 Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages

Revisiting the Metalinguistic Hypothesis in Second Language Reading Development: Evidence from Linguistically Diverse Chinese Learners in Hong Kong

Prof. Sihui (Echo) KE

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

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Abstract

While it is generally agreed that metalinguistic awareness plays a critical role in language acquisition and reading development, the definition of metalinguistic awareness varies when researchers examine the link between metalinguistic awareness and X. Among researchers of first-language (L1) or second-language (L2) reading, metalinguistic awareness has been defined as "the ability to reflect on and manipulate the structural features of language" (see Nagy's [2007] metalinguistic hypothesis concerning the reciprocal relationships among metalinguistic awareness, vocabulary, and reading comprehension). Reading in an L2, as compared to reading in an L1, can be even more metalinguistically demanding according to Ke, Zhang, and Koda (2023). This talk extends this line of inquiry to Chinese, a non-alphabetic language with a morphosyllabic writing system, and aims to clarify the metalinguistic nodes, pathways, and network systems involved in Chinese reading in a linguistically diverse educational setting such as Hong Kong. Drawing on evidence from two ongoing GRF projects on Chinese morphological awareness instruction and Cantonese dynamic assessment among primary school readers in Hong Kong, I will share three novel preliminary findings. First, more-skilled L1 readers, less-skilled L1 readers, and L2 readers rely on the same nodes but follow different pathways in their Chinese reading network systems; only more-skilled L1 readers are able to develop morphological awareness as a binding agent. Second, morphological spelling mediates the relationship between morphological awareness and text-level reading comprehension among both L1 and L2 primary school readers of Chinese. Finally, I will discuss the development and validation of a localized dynamic assessment of Cantonese morphological awareness. This assessment demonstrates greater predictive power for reading comprehension than commonly used static assessments among primary school readers of Chinese, including L1 readers, L2 readers, and readers with special educational needs (SEN).

Speaker

Sihui Echo Ke received her Ph.D. in Second Language Acquisition from Carnegie Mellon University. She is currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Language Science and Technology at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Director of the MA program in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, and Principal Investigator of the Bilingual and Biliteracy Research Lab (https://bbrlab.weebly.com/). Her research examines second language reading and biliteracy development, cross-linguistic transfer, metalinguistic awareness, and reading assessment and instruction, with a focus on Chinese and multilingual learners. Her publications include a monograph published by Cambridge University Press and articles in leading linguistics and education journals. She is an Associate Editor of *Cogent Education* and the UKLA's *Journal of Research in Reading*. In 2025, she received the Association for Reading and Writing in Asia Mid-Career Excellence Award.

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香港中文大學-北京語言大學漢語語言學與應用語言學聯合研究中心 CUHK-BLCU Joint Research Center for Chinese Linguistics and Applied Linguistics

All Are Welcome

Enquiries
Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, CUHK
Tel: (852)3943 1516 Fax: (852)2603 7755 E-mail: lin@cuhk.edu.hk