

## Re: Chinese dictation

**Source:** <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2004-12/0294.html>

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**From:** Richard Herring (*junk\_at\_[127.0.0.1]*)

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In message <87wtwd282d.fsf@informatik.uni-freiburg.de>, Lee Sau Dan <danlee@informatik.uni-freiburg.de> writes

>>>>> *"Richard" == Richard Herring <junk@[127.0.0.1]> writes:*

>

>>> *What are the difference that you think would necessitate a*

>>> *radically different way of jotting down things?*

>

> *Richard> The differences between an alphabetic writing system and*

> *Richard> a character-based one, of course. If I'm hurriedly*

> *Richard> jotting down an English sentence, I cn omit sm vwls nd*

> *Richard> fill them in later. Can you do that sort of ad-hoc*

> *Richard> shorthand in Chinese?*

>

> *Why not? We can jot down the key words and then fill in the*

> *prepositions and various particles later. I don't think that's a*

> *difficult skill, is it?*

I don't think so, either, but I'm asking because I don't know. What I don't know is how easy it is for you to work out what the omitted prepositions and particles should have been.

>

> *Richard> What I'm asking, if it still isn't clear to you, is how*

> *Richard> you do it with a character-based system. Is this really*

> *Richard> so hard?*

>

> *No. We can simply "borrow" homonymous characters, correcting them*

> *later on.*

"Is this really so hard" referred not to the dictation question, but to your apparent inability to give a straight answer to a simple question, the way Dylan kindly did in his reply to me. You seem to be trying to turn what should have been a simple inquiry with a simple answer into something more like pulling teeth.

> *Richard> For alphabetic writing systems, there's spelling.*

>>> *But the spelling often doesn't transcribe the sounds, as in*

>>> *the case of English.*

>

> *Richard*> *Yes, so what?*

>

>*That's the point. Both Chinese and English writings systems are  
>mnemonic. What you do with the English script, we often do with the  
>Chinese script in a similar way. There is nothing magical.*

I haven't suggested there is. I was asking about what you do when it's not mnemonic enough.

> >> *How do you write [huz sOrd] in English?*

>

> *Richard*> *I don't know. Please spell it for me.*

>

>*So, you can't do a dictation? You should then first ask the English  
>speakers who can dictate, how they do it.*

<fx: whooosh>

You've missed the point. I was indicating how \*I\* resolve ambiguities in English. \*I\* \*ask\* \*you\* \*to\* \*spell\* \*it\* \*out\*.

What's the Chinese for "Please spell it for me." ?

> >> *How can you use a 5-vowel alphabet (or 6 if you include "y") to  
> >> write English, which has more than a dozen of distinctive  
> >> vowels?*

>

> *Richard*> *What has that to do with anything?*

>

>*That means, the spelling is pretty mnemonic in nature.*

Yes. So?

>

> *Richard*> *I'm trying to \_write\_ these words, not pronounce them.*

>

>*We also write our Chinese words in our Chinese script. So, what's the  
>difference?*

The difference is that each English word is written as a sequence of symbols which can be named individually, while each Chinese word is written with a single character. What I was trying to establish, and Dylan explained, is how you identify that single character when there's an ambiguity.

> *Richard*> *For Chinese, what's the equivalent?*

> >> *Chinese is a very mnemonical script, just like English.*

> >> *English spellings show \_hints\_ about the pronunciations; so*

> >> *does Chinese characters.*

>

> *Richard*> *Yes, so? I'm not asking about pronunciation but about*

> *Richard*> *writing.*

>  
>So, we write our words in our script, which is mnemonic. You write  
>English words in the English script, which is also mnemonic. What's  
>the real difference?

The question is about how you resolve things when it's not mnemonic enough.

>  
>>> We don't count the strokes when we write or dictate.  
>  
> Richard> So how do you resolve ambiguities?  
>  
>>> Do you count the length of words when you write English?  
>  
> Richard> Only when doing crosswords. When dictating, I don't need  
> Richard> to, because I can refer to the individual letters of the  
> Richard> word when necessary.  
>  
>We do the same for Chinese. We can refer to the components and basic  
>stroke shapes of Chinese characters, when the need arises. That's how  
>we teach people on the other side of the telephone to write characters  
>they don't know how to write (which happens most frequently with  
>"difficult" personal names). Treat it as the Chinese analogy of  
>"spelling".

At last we're getting there. That's exactly what I was asking about.

>  
>If I didn't know the Latin script, you'd have a hard time explaining  
>me what "spelling" is and how it works in your script. Similarly,  
>since you don't know Chinese characters, it's difficult to explain to  
>you how this "spelling a Chinese character" works. It has things to  
>do with the structure (the characters, despite common belief in the  
>West, aren't arbitrary shapes, but are a well structured set of  
>symbols). If you don't know the structure, it's hard to explain it to  
>you.

Well, you could try. After all, there's nothing magical about it.

>  
> Richard> Come on, this isn't a difficult question. When people  
> Richard> dictate Chinese,  
>  
>We write the words we hear. Just like you do with English. This  
>isn't an answer so difficult to understand.  
>  
> Richard> how do they resolve homophones when the context isn't  
> Richard> enough?  
>  
>We know the meaning of the words, and we know which characters mean  
>the same thing and have the same pronunciations as these words. So,  
>we know which characters to use to write what we hear. The very same  
>thing that you do with "sea" vs. "see", "fair" vs. "fare", "soul"

>vs. "sole", etc.

My question was about those occasions when the context isn't enough. As I said, imagine dictating a very terse telegram. The intended recipient knows the context, but the person in the telegraph office doesn't.

>*I can't see any \_radical\_ difference, except the  
>mystery about the Chinese script that you have in mind. Once you  
>learn how it works, it's no longer mysterious.*

You are imputing something to me that is not there, and that seems to be making you respond to some imaginary question that's also not there, with more questions instead of a straightforward answer.

I have no "mystery" in my mind. I don't have a mystical belief that Chinese characters are arbitrary shapes. I understand that they are structured; I just don't know the details. I know that there are homophones, but I also know that all languages are sufficiently expressive to deal with that.

I observe that there are obvious, non-mysterious differences between writing a word as one or two characters and as a long sequence of letters, and I wanted to know what practical effects that has. Dylan's second answer was exactly what I was looking for.

--  
Richard Herring