Lin Xiao
École Normale Supérieure de Paris, France

From Vernacular to Standard Norm: Oral-to-Written Transitions and Elite Bilingual Grammar-Writing in the Genesis of Standard Mandarin

Between 1850 and 1950, Chinese underwent a major linguistic convergence that culminated in Standard Mandarin, officially named *Pǔtōnghuà* in 1955. Challenging the view that this standard was primarily the product of top-down state standardization (Zhou, 2021), this paper approaches its emergence as a process of **koineization**: the gradual convergence of competing dialectal systems prior to formal codification (Samarin, 1971; Siegel, 1985; Trudgill, 1986; Mufwene, 2001). It examines three mechanisms: the textualization of oral and performance genres, Western descriptions of Mandarin, and Chinese intellectuals' grammatical codification.

First, drawing on vernacular opera librettos (*Chēwángfǔ qǔběn*) and missionary and diplomatic textbooks, we investigate how colloquial features were retained, regularized or omitted in writing, and how the colloquial (*báihuà*) and literary (*wényán*) registers interacted.

Second, we assess Western grammars as sources of linguistic information, conceptual models and normative authority. We hypothesize that they contributed substantially to the description and analysis of Mandarin, but played a more limited role in establishing its norms.

Third, we trace Chinese grammar-writing from Ma Jianzhong's *Mǎ shì wéntōng* (1898), a grammar of Classical Chinese influenced by European grammatical traditions, to grammars of the national language (*Guóyǔ*) from the 1920s onwards. Li Jinxi's *Xīnzhù Guóyǔ Wénfǎ* (1924), followed by Lü Shuxiang's *Zhōngguó Wénfǎ Yàolüè* (1942–1944) and Wang Li's *Zhōngguó Xiàndài Yǔfǎ* (1943–1944), illustrates how Chinese intellectuals adapted grammatical categories to describe and legitimize emerging linguistic norms. We argue that these grammars became important agents of standardization, mediating between the *wényán–báihuà* diglossia, the promotion of *Guóyǔ* and the prestige of Beijing speech.

Methodologically, we combine vernacular materials, including 28 nineteenth-century novels, opera scripts and dialogues, with Western and Chinese grammars, dictionaries and textbooks. Syntactic features distinguishing Nanjing Mandarin, Beijing Mandarin and *Pǔtōnghuà* are coded as binary isoglosses and analysed using Principal Component Analysis (PCA). We also compare grammatical terminology, textual examples and citations to assess how different traditions contributed to the emergence of Standard Mandarin.

Preliminary results show that Standard Mandarin clusters closer to nineteenth-century Nanjing Mandarin than to contemporary Beijing Mandarin (Xiao, 2026). This finding highlights the tension between Beijing's political prestige and Nanjing Mandarin's enduring cultural influence. By integrating vernacular textualization, Western grammatical description and Chinese intellectuals' grammar-writing, this paper contributes to broader research on linguistic convergence, multilingual literacy and standardization.

Références

Haugen, E. (1966). Dialect, Language, Nation. *American Anthropologist*, 68(4), 922–935.
Li, J. X. (1924). *Xīnzhù Guóyǔ Wénfǎ* [Nouvelle grammaire de la langue nationale]. Shanghai : Commercial Press.
Liu, W., et al. (éd.) (1991–1993). *Chēwángfǔ Qǔběn* [Livrets d'opéras de la résidence du prince Che].
Lü, S. X. (1942–1944). *Zhōngguó Wénfǎ Yàolüè* [Abrégé de grammaire chinoise]. Chongqing/Shanghai : Commercial Press.
Ma, J. (1898). *Mǎshì Wéntōng* [Traité général de grammaire de Maître Ma]. Beijing : Commercial Press. Réimpr. 1983.
Mufwene, S. S. (2001). *The Ecology of Language Evolution*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Samarin, W. J. (1971). Salient and Substantive Pidginization. In D. Hymes (éd.), *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages* (p. 117–140). Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
Siegel, J. (1985). Koines and Koineization. *Language in Society*, 14(3), 357–378.
Trudgill, P. J. (1986). *Dialects in Contact*. Oxford : Blackwell.
Wang, L. (1943–1944). *Zhōngguó Xiàndài Yǔfǎ* [Grammaire du chinois moderne]. Shanghai : Commercial Press.
Xiao, L. (2026). Approche computationnelle pour la koinéisation de l'ancien mandarin à travers une double documentation européenne et chinoise XVIIe–XXe siècles. *Humanistica 2026*, Paris, France, 36–43.
Zhou, M. (2021). Standardization of Minority Languages: Nation-State Building and Globalization. In W. Ayres-Bennett et J. Bellamy (éd.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Standardization* (p. 170 –198). Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.