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A note on a terminological / conceptual problem in Western
analyses of the Chinese writing
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A fundamental distinction lies between Western and Chinese linguistic traditions. Each tradition has developed its own analysis on different basis and provided original linguistic typologies. In the west, for example, 8 “parts of speech” were distinguished on the basis of words in the 2nd s. BC, whereas in China, 6 so called “types of characters” were proposed on the basis of the script in the 1rst s. AD. Graphic etymology, which would not be conceivable with a mere phonetic writing, was even developed during that time. Yet the fact that writing records the spoken language has long been recognised by Chinese scholars (Harbsmeier 1998:32, Levi 1995: 47).

If modern linguists present today characters as corresponding to morphemes, some identify them as the basic units of the Chinese script (Arcodia & Basciano 2021, Handel 2021). This poses a conceptual problem and goes against the general idea of writing based on a limited number of basic elements which combine to write down words or morphemes. In this presentation I would like to point out a terminological and conceptual problem related to the fact that the translation in western languages of some essential Chinese linguistic terms related to writing is far from being flawless. The rendering of *zì* 字, for example, as “character”/ “graph” is not only incomplete, it is also misleading and seem to produce some quite unfortunate misconceptions. A refinement of the conception of *zì* 字 in western language is needed to allow a clearer understanding of the Chinese writing system. I shall present the different uses of the term *zì* 字 in a historical perspective to show that the term *zì* 字 was not just a simple graphic symbol, a kind of typographic sign so to speak, but has always integrated the necessary links between the written signs and the spoken language until it was replaced by *cí* 词 in the 20th c. I shall then address the question of basic elements of the Chinese script and show that it is not because there is no special term for “basic element” that basic elements do not exist.

Arcodia, Giorgio Francesco & Basciano Bianca, 2021, *Chinese Linguistics: An Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press.

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Lallot, Jean, 1988, « Origine et développement de la théorie des parties du discours en Grèce », *Langages* , 92, p. 11-23.

Levi, Jean, 1995, *La Chine romanesque*, Paris : Le Seuil.