

FREQUENTLY USED CHINESE CHARACTERS IN MAJOR CHINESE SOCIETIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Chinese is a language quite unique among the many natural languages. This is because not only of its many special characteristics, but also of its very wide usage around the world. Nowadays there are three areas in which the majority of dwellers speak the Chinese language. These three areas are Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Beside the simplified versus the standard character contrast and differences in the learning of reading, are there any other differences among the three areas in terms of language use, especially those related to the use of words, which may deserve attention from the psychologist? To study this question, we analyzed and compared across the three areas the most frequently used 500 characters drawn from frequency norm studies (the 500 most frequently used characters represent over 75% of characters used in everyday written communications). Results showed that the portion of characters commonly used in all three areas was lower than what had been expected. Pairwise comparisons revealed that Taiwan and Hong Kong had the greatest overlap of character use while the Mainland China versus Taiwan-Hong Kong contrast had the smallest. In addition, we analyzed some special characters used in each area and categorized the words that could contain these characters for each area. It was shown that both word construction and word frequency associated with the various semantic categories had obvious area characteristics. Based on these results of character and word comparisons, we discuss the similarity and difference in terms of both the use and the semantic contents of the Chinese language associated with the three areas. Implications of the present methodology and results on psychological research are also discussed.

Keywords: Character frequency comparison, Chinese language