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A Letter to Nominate Professor William S-Y. Wang for an Honorary Degree at the University of Chicago （代序）

December 17，2017

Professor Lenore Grenoble，Chair
Department of Linguistics
University of Chicago

Re：*Nomination of Professor William S-Y. Wang for an Honorary Degree*

Dear Lenore，

I am so happy that the faculty of the Department of Linguistics unanimously support my proposal to nominate Professor Emeritus William S-Y. Wang，of Hong Kong Polytechnic University，for an honorary degree at the University of Chicago.

I met Professor Wang for the first time，at a conference on language evolution，at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 2001. His presentation was titled "Language evolution and leaky grammars." He addressed the issue of whether grammars cover all aspects of communication，providing fitting structures for speakers to

encode adequately all types of information they want to convey. There are often new ideas the current grammar cannot help speakers express in the way they want, which account for innovations and partly for the continuous evolution of languages. The paper illustrated the gradual way in which languages have evolved phylogenetically, since their embryonic beginnings 500,000-200,000 years ago to their modern complex structures, continuing to respond to the ever-evolving communicative needs of speakers. He correlated this evolution with the evolution of hominine anatomical and mental structures, consistent with his emergentist conception of languages as complex adaptive systems.

Since then, Professor Wang has left on me a lasting positive impression that keeps growing with every opportunity I have had to interact with him. He and I have crossed paths again several times at conferences in Asia (China, namely, Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan), in Europe (Lyon), and in the US (Indiana University), and I have corresponded with him on various occasions. I am struck by the extensive breadth and depth of his knowledge both of the specific subject matters we discussed and of the history of linguistics, as well as by the scope of his interdisciplinarity in approaching various issues and topics in especially evolutionary linguistics. This term, which he coined with a student and collaborator of his in 2005 (James W. Minett, in the subtitle of a book they coedited: *Essays in evolutionary linguistics*), subsumes not only the phylogenetic emergence of language(s) but also research questions traditionally covered in historical and genetic linguistics, as well as the current concern with language endangerment and loss. It reflects the particular way in which he has

approached language evolution, on the model of biological evolution—and indeed the term *evolutionary linguistics* is patterned on *evolutionary biology*.

Professor Wang is among the few outstanding linguists that have really bridged evolutionary linguistics with evolutionary biology and research on linguistic complexity to complexity in cybernetics, directing attention to interactions of subsystems or modules within a language and avoiding the trap of reducing linguistic complexing to large numbers of units and rules within the system. He is among the first people to have conceived of languages as complex adaptive systems, with emergent patterns in constant state of flux and in search of equilibrium, a position that makes it easier to account for the actuation of the so-called"internally-motivated change." Early in his career, in an article titled"Tone change in Chaozhou Chinese: A study in lexical diffusion," he had disputed the Neogrammarian assumption of"sound laws"in the ways that the phonetic inventories of languages evolve, with the changes putatively applying swiftly and across the board to classes of sounds. Consistent with his later position that grammars leak, he pointed out exceptions to sound classes in the spread of changes. He argues that the changes affect one word at a time, spreading gradually to other lexical items that have the same sounds(in similar phonological environment)when they get to be used, subject to the usage frequencies of the lexical items in which they occur and the analogies established by speakers. Words that are less frequently used or joined the lexicon at a different time may not undergo the change. He has refined his position in several other papers(1991, 1995, 1996, 1998), prevailing over the resistance his hypothesis received in the 1970s,

as pointed out in the support letters.

Professor Wang is one of the pioneers in modeling language emergence, evolution, and vitality. Since 2000, he and his students/collaborators have published their work on modeling in venues such as the *International Journal of Speech Technology* (2001), *Language and Linguistics* (2005), *Lingua* (2008), not counting the Chinese venues. His work on complexity has been published not only in traditional linguistics venues but also in *Complexity* (2002, 2005), where it has been subjected to the rigorous requirements of another discipline. He has also published in venues such as *Nature* and *Scientific American*, for which he guest-edited a special issue on language evolution in 1991.

Professor Wang has also collaborated with scholars outside linguistics, including the late John Holland, a leader in the study of emergence and complexity, and [the late] Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza, the geneticist who, among other things, verified the extent to which findings in genetic linguistics are consistent with current hypotheses in genetics regarding the dispersal of the human species around the world since the exodus out of Africa. When it comes to scientific knowledge (outside linguistics), Professor Wang has gone to the horse's mouth, so to speak, to get the state of art that would inform his interdisciplinary research. His curiosity led him to set up his own labs, at UC Berkeley, at the City University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and now at Hong Kong PolyU, where, in collaboration with his students and colleagues, as well as with other non-linguist scientists, he can conduct his interdisciplinary research in evolutionary linguistics and on complexity.

Professor Wang is a rare linguist who I have heard publicly state that languages need not have the same level of complexity, no more than(other)technologies need be equally complex. Having languages that are less complex need not be correlated with particular stages of human or mental evolution, which reminded me of the celebrated Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, who, unlike many students of language evolution, hypothesized in 1922 that reducing complexity in language represents progress, although, to be sure, evolution is not progress. We are reminded of the position that languages should be assessed according to whether or not they meet the communicative needs of their speakers but not according to how complex their systems are. This is a taboo topic that, as Professor Wang reminded us at that workshop which I hosted in Lyon in 2011, linguists have shied generally away from for the wrong reason, viz., that a language characterized as simple or less complex may be treated as primitive or less evolved. He made his comment while remarking that linguists should try to understand the phenomenon of complexity itself, in light of modern research on the subject matter in other disciplines, especially cybernetics. Note that the morphosyntax of his own language, Chinese/Mandarin, has often been claimed to be simpler than those of languages with(wide ranges of)derivational and inflectional morphemes. So, his observation that some languages may be less complex than others was an unbiased invitation to revisit the received doctrine in linguistics, according to which modern languages must all be of the same level of overall complexity.

Sinologists acclaim the contributions that Professor Wang has made to the genetic classification of Sinitic languages and their typological peculiarities, including the study of its tones. He is

credited with founding the Department of East Asian Languages at Ohio State University, along with the Department of Linguistics at the same institution (one of the best in the USA in phonology, historical linguistics, and modeling language evolution). He was elected as the first president of the International Association of Chinese Linguistics (founded in 1992), in recognition of his leadership in Chinese linguistics. He founded the *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* in 1973, which is acknowledged as "the first international [journal] in the field" and, according to Professor David Bradley (see his letter), it is "the top journal for linguistics of the Chinese area." Professor Wang has edited the journal since its foundation, although its managing office moved to the Chinese University of Hong Kong from UC Berkeley, where he taught from 1966 to 1994, only in 2008. He led the team that produced the first electronic database on Chinese dialects, which includes "Materials from important Middle and Modern Chinese dictionaries and rhyme books, as well as pronunciations of Sino-Japanese, Sino-Korean and different Chinese dialects," and has facilitated comparisons among them. In addition, he launched in 2009 the International Conference in Evolutionary Linguistics, whose 8th meeting took place at Indiana University in 2016 and which has stimulated several Chinese scholars to study language evolution.

All the support letters I have received, from well-established scholars, are very enthusiastic about this nomination for an honorary degree (PhD) from the University of Chicago. I will not summarize them here but will highlight some of the statements they make:

According to Professor Virginia Yip, of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who has worked with Professor Wang for over a

decade now, "He is one of the few internationally renowned linguists whose scholarship and academic impact have spanned the two continents across the Pacific Ocean. He is also a central figure and a world authority in Chinese linguistics, devoted to promoting academic exchange between East and West, and among the three regions of Greater China, namely, the Mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan." "In his eighties Prof. Wang has undertaken another line of research at HKPU: cognitive decline and language loss in the sunset years." "Prof. Wang is aware that ageing and dementia are nowadays tough challenges confronting all contemporary societies worldwide. Therefore by means of EEG experiments his team wishes to analyze how the elderly brain differs from that of the young, and how healthy and normal ageing can be distinguished from pathological ageing." "As a well-respected senior and world-acclaimed scholar, Prof. Wang best demonstrates how the concept of *amortality* ['agelessness'] is embodied. [...] After half a century of scholarly work and teaching, Prof. Wang still takes immense pleasure in doing research and nurturing young talents, and his sharp mind is always open to new possibilities."

Professor Keith Johnson, of UC Berkeley states regarding Professor Wang's demonstration of the inadequacy of Neogrammarians' "sound laws": "Chen and Wang(1975)used computational analysis of Chinese dialects to document just how extensive the residue problem is, concluding that 'Linguists have generally underestimated the extent of exceptions to the so-called 'exceptionless' sound laws'. By measuring the extent of the residue problem, and finding it large Chen and Wang(1975)forced the discipline to pay attention. The mechanism that Wang had

intuited in 1969—the competition between sound changes as they diffuse gradually from word to word through the lexicon—and named 'lexical diffusion' now had a prominent role to play in the linguistic understanding of sound change. "

Professor David Bradley, of La Trobe University, observes: "His publication record is extremely influential, very wide-ranging and deeply insightful and valuable for many areas of linguistics. This includes several dozen major books spanning over fifty years, hundreds of articles and chapters, and hundreds of talks presented at top institutions around the world. "

According to Jean-Marie Hombert, of Université Lyon II, "Characteristic of Professor Wang is his ability to elaborate new and innovative ideas and, more importantly, to operationalise them into interesting projects that bring strict 'narrow' linguistics in contact with other disciplines (biology, genetics, complexity, neurolinguistics). These research projects have allowed him, as well as many of his students and other younger scholars, to engage in top ranking innovative research. "

Professor Thomas Schoenneman, of Indiana University writes that Professor Wang's computer modeling research "was inspired by discussions with computer science pioneer John Holland, who invented the idea of genetic algorithms in the 1960's. Prof. Wang and Holland held several workshops on language evolution at the Santa Fe Institute during the 2000's. With Tao Gong and James Minett, Prof. Wang also explored the processes of language acquisition, from both an intra-generational (between children) and inter-generational (between adults and children) perspective, using a multi-agent computational model (Gong, Minett, & Wang, 2010). "

Professor Shi Feng, a long time associate of Professor Wang who now teaches at Nankai University writes："Prof. Wang has helped nurture numerous talents in linguistics：Hashimoto Mantaro, Anne Yue-Hashimoto, Matthew Chen, Hsieh Hsin-I, Shibatani Masayoshi, Liao Chiu-chung, Benjamin K. Tsou, Lien Chin-fa, Shen Zhongwei, Ogura Mieko, Kong Jiangping, Peng Gang, Wang Feng, Gong Tao, and so on, who are all accomplished scholars in their own right. Prof. Wang is modest and sincere towards people and broad-minded. Many students have been directly or indirectly inspired and influenced by him to embark on their journey of linguistics."The list of scholars influenced by Professor Wang in one way or another includes several other non-Chinese scholars like myself, who was not a student of his.

Shi Feng adds："Prof. Wang once remarked that the boundaries between different disciplines are like the lines we draw on the beach. With the new tide of advanced knowledge coming onshore, boundaries are slightly altered or even entirely erased. Human knowledge, especially knowledge on language study, should be interconnected and eventually integrated. Cross-disciplinary and pan-disciplinary open research should be the important trait that characterizes contemporary science."

Professor Alain Peyraube, Emeritus director of research at CNRS, Paris, former director of Lyon's Institute for Advanced Study, and a leading Sinologist concludes his letter with the following："Prof. Wang is indisputably the most eminent figure in Chinese linguistics and one of the few linguists in the world that has marked his era with his exceptional vision of language problems and his varied and prolific output."

In his letter, which I received just as I was about to conclude this nominaton, Professor Ovid J. L. Tzeng at "Academia Sinica", Taiwan, writes: "Professor Bill Wang has an immense power of scholarship, very insightful and always looking for new local problems with a global vision. Four years ago, he created a research center of language and human complexity at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, joined by Peking University, and the University System of Taiwan ('Tsing Hua U.', 'Chiao Tung U.', 'Central U.', and Yang Ming U.). He has been able to mobilize top scientists from all these universities to work together in order to tackle the complicated problems of language evolution from its emergence, through thousand years of diversifications, to the intertwining relations of multi-language and multi-cultural new world. "

Professor Wang's stature in linguistics is like that of the elephant, in an Indian myth, which was described in different but complementary ways by blind people that touched different parts of its body. He has been very prolific, with hundreds of seminal publications, which include 29 books that he has (co-)authored or (co-)edited. I am surprised that although he has been honored in many ways, the distinctions do not include an honorary degree. I think the University of Chicago can crown his stellar career by conferring one to him. He has definitely contributed in numerous ways to the advancement of knowledge in several areas of linguistics. He has revolutionized our thinking in various ways, which can inspire people who are now engaged in decolonizing knowledge construction in the humanities and the social sciences, not only by deconstructing it but also by enriching it with more alternative or accurate perspectives from outside the West. He has

certainly been a leader in de-parochializing areas of linguistics, for a richer understanding on the subject matters of our investigation. The University of Chicago can be the first top rate university to recognize this.

Professor Wang receiving the award from president Robert Zimmer of the University of Chicago on June 9, 2018

Sincerely,

Salikoko S. Mufwene,

The Frank J. McLoraine Distinguished Service Professor of Linguistics and the College;

Professor, Committee on Evolutionary Biology;

Professor, Committee on the Conceptual and Historical Studies of Science;

Professor, Committee on African Studies.

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目　　录

My Berkeley Days with Bill Wang

Hsin-I Hsieh

University of Hawaii

1　Berkeley，1966

Shen Zhongwei sent me an e-mail，on December 30，2017，to invite me to contribute an article to his volume celebrating Bill Wang's 85th birthday. I had a busy day that day，and around 12 p. m. ，I went to bed，but I could not fall asleep promptly. I kept remembering episodes in the days when I studied under Bill Wang at Berkeley. In those memorable days，Berkeley was shining brilliantly，and Bill Wang was very young and vigorous and was running several research projects funded by federal grants. Since I could not fall asleep，I got up from bed and started to read *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier，the fiction that I loved when I was young. I started with the first sentence，*Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again. . .* ，and I became very nostalgic.

I went to Berkeley in the summer of 1966 when I was 27 years old. I knew I wanted to study under Bill Wang，but I was not ready for his seminar，so I attended the seminar as an auditor. One day in the seminar，the topic was on ancient Chinese phonology，and I