

Mapping the Evolution of Psycholinguistics in China (1979–2023): A Mixed-Methods Review

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Abstract

Psycholinguistics, as an interdisciplinary field, has attracted increasing scholarly attention since the early twentieth century. Despite its relatively late emergence in China, the field has experienced substantial growth in both theoretical and applied research. This study provides a mixed-methods review of the development of psycholinguistics in China by examining 1,312 literature published in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. Combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, it investigates major research trends, thematic focuses, and developmental characteristics of the field. The findings indicate that the evolution of psycholinguistics in China can be divided into three stages: an initial stage from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, a growth stage from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, and a maturity stage from the late 2000s onwards. Research output increased steadily during the first two stages but has declined in recent years. Existing studies have mainly focused on introducing international theories, discussing foundational issues, and exploring practical applications. However, limitations remain in terms of research scope and depth. The study suggests that future research should address local concerns, innovate research paradigms, and strengthen interdisciplinary collaboration to promote the sustainable development of psycholinguistics in China.

Keywords: Psycholinguistics, China, Research trends, Mixed-methods review

1. Introduction

Psycholinguistics is the psychological study of language, which mainly focuses on the cognitive processes of language comprehension, production, and acquisition (Carroll, 2007). As an interdisciplinary branch of science, psycholinguistics has attracted the attention of overseas scholars for over a century. At the beginning of the 20th century, Wilhelm Wundt,

known as the “father of experimental psychology”, conducted empirical studies to explore the process of language comprehension and production, which initially built up a link between psychology and linguistics (Blumenthal, 1970). Later, other pioneers like Kantor (1936) and Osgood & Sebeok (1954) proposed and developed the concepts of “psycholinguistics”, which marked its establishment as a discipline. In the middle of the 20th century, the development of psycholinguistics mainly benefited from structuralist linguistics, information theory, and behaviorist psychology, while scholars resorted to Chomsky’s transformational-generative grammar later in the 1960s (Liu, 2022). With the development of cognitive science and information processing technology, psycholinguistics absorbed and integrated the research paradigms, theories, and tools of varied disciplines, including linguistics, psychology, neuroscience, computational science, and so on during the 1970s and the 1980s (Kess, 1992). Nowadays, psycholinguistics has yielded fruitful achievements in both theoretical and practical construction, which promotes people’s understanding of language and mind.

Due to historical reasons, psycholinguistics did not attract widespread academic attention in China until the late 1970s. Although it got off a late start, psycholinguistic research in China has absorbed diverse research paradigms from overseas studies and conducted extensive empirical investigations into the cognitive processes of language comprehension, production, and acquisition among Chinese native speakers and foreign language learners, thus exploring a localized path for the development of psycholinguistics in China (Shu, Liu & Xu, 2009). Since recent years have witnessed notable theoretical and practical achievements in this field, some scholars have delved into reviewing relevant research hotspots and dynamic development. However, most studies (e.g., Li & Li, 2007; Qian & Hong, 2014; Suo, 2016) mainly adopt qualitative approaches and focus only on specific periods of development. A comprehensive review of the overall development of psycholinguistics in China through both quantitative and qualitative methods remains lacking.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach to review the development of psycholinguistics in China over the past 45 years by examining the distribution and content of research literature published in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database from 1979 to 2023. It aims to summarize the developmental trends and diachronic research focuses of the field, while identifying its existing limitations and future directions. Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What are the major developmental trends and research focuses of psycholinguistics in China? 2) What limitations characterize the current development of psycholinguistics in China, and what directions should future research take?

2. The Development Trends and Focuses of Psycholinguistics in China

2.1 Development Trends of Psycholinguistics in China

To explore the overall development trends of psycholinguistics in China, this study used “心理语言学 (psycholinguistics)” as both a topic and keyword to retrieve relevant literature published between 1979 and 2023 from the CNKI database. The corpus consisted of selected journal articles together with their titles, abstracts, and keywords. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, all records were manually checked, and non-academic materials such

as news reports and conference announcements were excluded. Ultimately, a total of 1,312 journal articles were collected and analyzed using AntConc and Datawrapper for data processing and visualization.

The annual distribution of psycholinguistic research in China from 1979 to 2023 is shown in Figure 1. Despite minor fluctuations, the number of publications increased steadily from 1979 to 2009, reaching a peak of 84 articles in 2009. However, a marked decline can be observed during the following period from 2010 to 2023. This apparent decline appears to be primarily driven by a divergence in academic terminology rather than a true decrease in research interest. As the field advanced, scholars increasingly adopted more specialized and cutting-edge keywords like “neural mechanisms” or “cognitive processing”. Consequently, a substantial volume of literature that would have previously fallen under the broad umbrella term of “psycholinguistics” is now categorized into other emerging sub-disciplines, such as neurolinguistics. Therefore, these findings suggest that psycholinguistics has not lost its scholarly appeal in China; rather, the field has evolved into highly specialized sub-disciplines in recent years.

Number of research literature

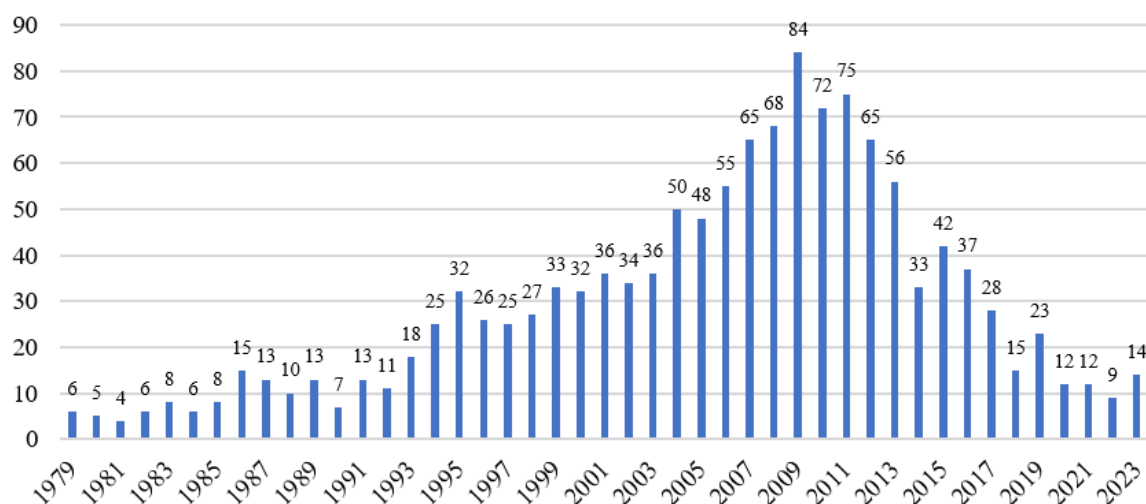


Figure 1. Annual Publication Trends of Psycholinguistic Research in China

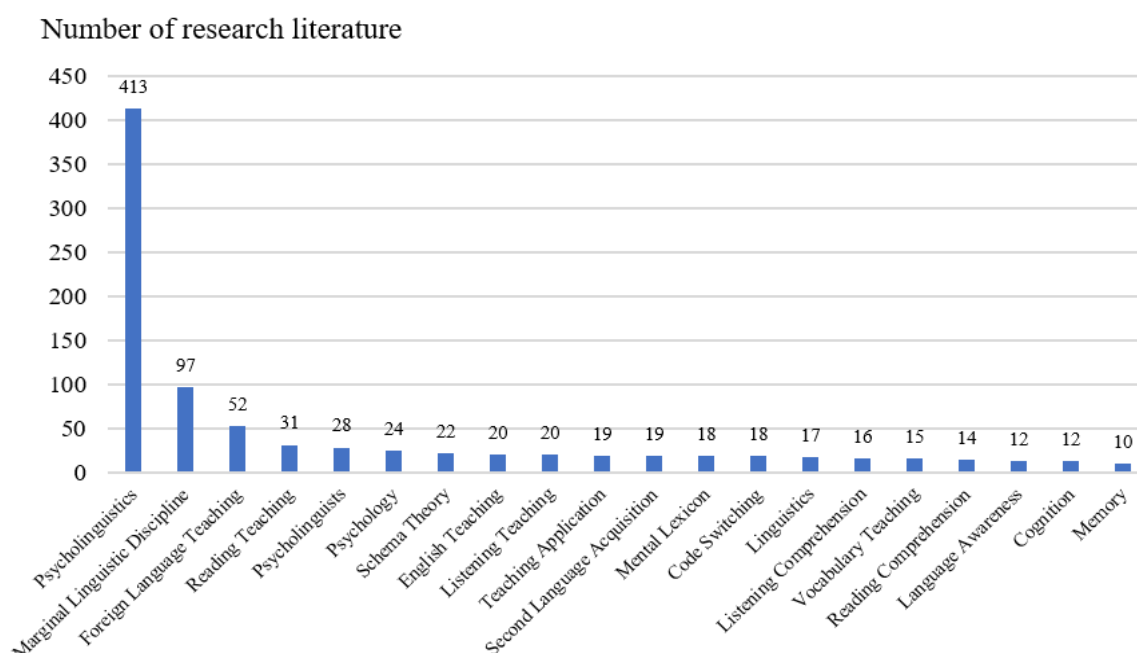


Figure 2. High-Frequency Keywords in Psycholinguistic Research in China

Based on the word-frequency analysis conducted with AntConc, Figure 2 presents the top 20 high-frequency keywords identified in the selected literature. Apart from “psycholinguistics,” the keyword “marginal linguistic discipline” ranks second in frequency, suggesting that psycholinguistics has often been viewed by scholarship in China as a peripheral branch of linguistic research rather than a central discipline. In addition, most of the high-frequency keywords are closely related to language teaching and learning, including “foreign language teaching,” “English teaching,” “teaching application,” and “second language acquisition.” More specifically, psycholinguistic studies have paid considerable attention to reading (with “reading teaching” and “reading comprehension” occurring 45 times in total), listening (with “listening teaching” and “listening comprehension” occurring 36 times in total), and vocabulary learning (with “vocabulary teaching” occurring 15 times). Furthermore, high-frequency keywords such as “mental lexicon,” “language awareness,” and “cognition” indicate a continued interest in the fundamental concerns of psycholinguistics, particularly the psychological mechanisms and cognitive processes underlying language comprehension, production, and acquisition.

2.2 The Diachronic Focus of Psycholinguistics in China

Based on previous studies (e.g., Li & Li, 2007; Qian & Hong, 2014; Suo, 2016) and the data presented above, the development of psycholinguistics in China can be divided into three stages: an initial stage from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, a growth stage from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, and a maturity stage from the late 2000s onward. To summarize the diachronic research hotspots, this section examines the main focuses of psycholinguistic research in China across these three stages by analyzing the content of selected literature

published between 1979 and 2023.

2.2.1 The Research Focus in the Initial Stage

From the end of the 1970s to the middle of the 1990s, both linguists and psychologists were dedicated to psycholinguistic studies in China, but they attached importance to different research fields. While linguists mainly focused on the introduction of theoretical achievements, such as the ideas from varied schools of Western psycholinguistics, psychologists paid much attention to empirical studies, namely the experimental verification of relevant psycholinguistic theories. Despite the limited research methods and the lack of innovation, these studies laid a solid foundation for the further development of psycholinguistics in China.

Specifically, linguists made a great contribution to introducing and publicizing overseas research on psycholinguistics, which not only attracted Chinese scholars' attention to this emerging discipline but also deepened their understanding of its research scopes, subjects, and methods. As the pioneer, Gui (1979) provided a comprehensive overview of the research issues, subjects, and content of Western psycholinguistics and had an in-depth discussion on its application in foreign language teaching, which marked the origin of psycholinguistic research in China. In the following decade, other linguists also made constant efforts in the introduction of the classical and latest ideas from varied schools of Western psycholinguistics. Among them, You (1979) introduced the opinions of American psycholinguists, which refuted the stimulus-response theory proposed by behaviorists. Liu (1982) conducted a comparative study of the viewpoints of three major approaches to Western psycholinguistics, namely the associationist approach, process approach, and content approach, thereby contributing to a clearer delineation of theoretical boundaries among different schools. Yu (1991) interpreted the definition and features of "speech act theory" and drew a comparison of the theoretical foundations between American and Russian psycholinguistic schools, further enriching the theoretical discussion in this emerging field.

In contrast, psychologists conducted several empirical studies on language acquisition and comprehension, which were characterized by a stronger emphasis on experimental validation and cognitive mechanisms. Concerning language acquisition, many scholars were dedicated to research on the formation of word concepts and the memory of Chinese characters. Among them, Zhu et al. (1982) adopted a synthetic investigation to explore the development of word concepts in schoolchildren, which showed that the influences of education, the difficulties of the word concepts as well as the unity between the object of thinking and the living experience exert great influence on the individual differences in forming word concepts. Zhang & Yang (1987) conducted three experiments to verify the effects of Chinese characters' stroke numbers on the capacity of short-term memory, which indicated that the measurement of short-term memory capacity should take into account the visual features of Chinese characters as an important cognitive factor. Regarding language comprehension, much effort was undertaken to explore the processing of Chinese characters and sentences under controlled experimental conditions. Among them, Peng, Guo & Zhang (1985) explored the information retrieval of Chinese characters in making similarity judgements under

recognition conditions, which proved that coding sound was an unnecessary step in meaning assessment. Chen & Peng (1985) conducted two experiments to explore the semantic retrieval of the Chinese language, which verified that the retrieval time of sentences varied from level to level and that the morphological effects of Chinese characters failed to play a critical role in information retrieval.

2.2.2 The Research Focus in the Growth Stage

From the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, interactions between linguists and psychologists became increasingly frequent, leading to joint efforts to explore core issues in psycholinguistic research in China. During this period, researchers adopted diverse theoretical and methodological paradigms to investigate the cognitive processes underlying language comprehension, production, and acquisition among Chinese native speakers and foreign language learners, yielding a substantial number of empirical findings. Among these, representative studies focused on language cognitive processing and second language acquisition.

As for language cognitive processing, relevant studies involved the comparative representations among the Chinese language, minority language, and foreign language. The research on cognitive processing of the Chinese language mainly involved Chinese character recognition and Chinese word representation. On the one hand, Peng & Wang (1997) explored the basic processing unit of Chinese character recognition through the evidence from the stroke number effect and radical number effect, which indicated that the processing time of a character is affected by the stroke numbers per radical and the radical number. On the other hand, Peng & Ding (1997a, 1997b) discussed the representation and processing of Chinese two-character words, summarized two main theoretical models, i.e., the split lexical storage model and the multi-level cluster representation model, and finally pointed out their limitations. Besides, Zhang (2005a, 2005b, 2008) focused on the representations of L2 mental lexicon by examining the connections in L2 mental lexicon with word association tests, investigating its differences with L1 mental lexicon, and exploring its development course through a longitudinal study, which revealed key features of bilingual lexical development. To further examine code-switching across languages, studies have analyzed the motivation and context of Hokkien-Mandarin switching (Xie, Zhang & Cheng, 2005) and explored the switching cost in Tibetan-Mandarin-English speakers' visual word recognition (Zhang & Cui, 2008).

Regarding second language acquisition, considerable attention was paid to the application of psycholinguistic theories in improving Chinese EFL learners' listening, writing, speaking, and reading skills. Among them, Sun (1996) discussed the difficulties in foreign language listening comprehension from the perspective of memory and proposed strategies to improve listening performance by optimizing the psychological processing of verbal information. Li (2000) applied psycholinguistic theory to examine the status quo and learning strategies in college English writing, identifying key problems such as weak expressive ability, limited sentence variety, and frequent use of Chinglish structures. Li (2002) analyzed the main obstacles to college students' oral performance based on Krashen's affective filter hypothesis,

suggesting that motivation, confidence, and cultural awareness significantly influence fluency and accuracy in spoken language. Yan (2003) provided a thorough introduction to two influential overseas reading patterns (i.e., Goodman's psycholinguistic pattern and Rumelhart's schema theory) and discussed their application in cultivating college students' reading skills, which showed that the combination of the top-down pattern and the interactive model could improve students' reading speed and comprehension.

2.2.3 The Research Focus in the Maturity Stage

Since the end of the 2000s, scholarship in the Chinese context has continued earlier lines of research and maintained a strong focus on the cognitive processes underlying language comprehension and acquisition. However, as an increasing number of researchers with multidisciplinary backgrounds have become actively engaged in psycholinguistic studies, recent years have also witnessed significant improvements in both the depth and scope of research output. In addition to foreign language teaching, considerable efforts have been made to extend its applications to areas such as the psychological processes involved in interpreting, as well as the rehabilitation of Chinese speakers with aphasia.

As for the psychological process of interpreting, psycholinguistic studies in China are mainly concerned with how attention, memory, emotions, and other psychological factors work in the information processing of interpreting. Among them, Liu (2010) discussed the important role of psycholinguistic theories in interpreting, which indicated that interpreting efficiency can be attributed to memory strategies, attention distribution, anti-interference capacity, and other related cognitive factors. Kang (2011) conducted an empirical study to verify the sources, scale, and severity of students' auditory and interpreting anxiety as well as their impacts on interpreting efficiency, thus not only constructing a new integrated theory of AA mode and IA mode but also proposing varied strategies to alleviate the anxiety. Hu & Ma (2013) explored the cognitive psychological model of target language production in simultaneous interpretation, which described the cognitive psychological production from the conceptualizer, formulator to articulator, and the conversion process from meaning code and speech code to physical and sound code. Introducing a cross-cultural theoretical framework, Lu and Liu (2022) drew on Russian psycholinguistics to divide the interpreting process into four interactive stages, including listening comprehension, memorization, transformation, and delivery, thus emphasizing the interpreter's cognitive processing of deep-structure meaning. Building further on interpreting phases, Wu (2023) constructed a detailed version of the interpreting triangle model and illustrated the relationships among varied interpreting stages, namely understanding, memory, transformation, coordination, expression, and interaction, which provided implications for interpretation teaching and testing.

Concerning Chinese speakers with aphasia, much attention is paid to the application of psycholinguistics in its diagnostic categories, psychological mechanisms, and rehabilitation. To introduce the diagnostic categories, Liao & Thompson (2017) interpreted the rationale for developing the Chinese Aphasia Language Battery (CALB) based on describing the language deficits and two major tests of aphasia, which indicated that its applicability lies in language cognitive processing models combined with modern Chinese phonology, lexicon, syntax, and

semantics. Broadening this diagnostic perspective, Chang, Sun & Zhu (2023) emphasized the necessity of integrating language representations and communicative functions for a more comprehensive assessment. Besides, Wang (2015) conducted an empirical study to examine Chinese Broca's aphasiacs' processing of different verb valency patterns, verifying that the greater valency a verb had, the less accuracy the processing could achieve. Further exploring these psychological mechanisms, Wang, Yu & Liu (2023) mapped functional category deficits in Chinese agrammatism, revealing severe impairments in Tense Phrases but faster recovery in polarity sensitivity. To explore aphasia rehabilitation, Wang et al. (2017) examined patients' auditory language processing based on a psycholinguistic assessment system, determined the damaged brain locations, and adopted transcranial direct current stimulation to treat sensory aphasia, which contributed to improving their abilities of phonetic analysis and lexical comprehension.

3. The Development Limitations and Prospects of Psycholinguistics in China

Over the past 45 years, psycholinguistic research in China has experienced a transformation from the initial stage, the growth stage to the maturity stage and witnessed substantial improvements in both research quantity and quality across various domains. Although much endeavor has been undertaken to introduce overseas studies on psycholinguistics, interpret the fundamental issues, and discuss its research applications, psycholinguistic research in China still faces limitations in the scope and depth of existing studies, which remain to be further explored and developed.

Firstly, psycholinguistic research in China shows a clear preference for certain research domains. Compared with language production, more attention has been paid to studies on language comprehension (e.g., language cognitive processing) and acquisition (e.g., second language acquisition). In addition, Chinese scholars tend to apply psycholinguistic theories to foreign language teaching and learning despite their relatively limited application in interpreting and aphasia research in the earlier stages. Then, empirical studies on psycholinguistics in China often lack in-depth theoretical discussion and exhibit a certain time lag. On the one hand, a majority of research tends to follow the existing research paradigms or summarize the theoretical and practical achievements of previous studies, which limits originality and theoretical innovation. On the other hand, there is a serious time lag between the introduction of international studies on psycholinguistics and the development of localized empirical studies, which indicates that psycholinguistics in China started relatively late and still lags behind Western developments in some respects. Finally, limited research methods are observed in studies exploring the cognitive process of language comprehension, production, and acquisition by scholars with rather homogeneous academic backgrounds. To give further explanation, linguists and psychologists mainly dominate psycholinguistic research in China and have limited access to advanced neuroscience facilities and experimental technologies.

In that case, it is of significance to respond to local concerns, broaden the research scopes, innovate the research paradigms, and involve more interdisciplinary methods. To improve the comprehensiveness of future research, scholars are supposed to respond to local concerns and

explore the issues with Chinese characteristics while tracing the hotspots of foreign research (Yu & Yang, 2023). Since much effort has been made to discuss language comprehension and acquisition, more importance should be attached to studies on language production in the future. Besides, on the basis of mature empirical research paradigms developed abroad, scholarship in the Chinese context should be dedicated to proposing rigorous and innovative empirical research frameworks in combination with the research techniques and methods of cognitive neuroscience and brain science and verifying their effectiveness in practical application (Liu, 2022). Finally, more scholars with different academic backgrounds like neurologists, therapists, and computer scientists are expected to be actively involved in the relevant scholarship through dialogue and cooperation. Under such circumstances, psycholinguistic research in China can be imbued with new vitality through innovative research paradigms, gradually approach the development pace of international research, and explore its localized developmental path.

4. Conclusion

As an interdisciplinary field, psycholinguistics has attracted academic attention since the beginning of the 20th century. Although relevant studies started relatively late in China, recent years have witnessed fruitful achievements in both theoretical and practical development. This study explores the development trends, focuses, limitations, and prospects of psycholinguistics in China over the past 45 years by examining the distribution and content of research literature published between 1979 and 2023 in the CNKI database.

It is found that the development of psycholinguistics in China can be divided into three stages, including the initial stage from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, the growth stage from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, and the maturity stage since the late 2000s. Generally speaking, the number of published research articles on psycholinguistics in China increased steadily during the first two stages, while the last stage has witnessed a noticeable decline in publication output. To be more specific, the initial stage witnessed linguists' efforts in the introduction of theoretical achievements and psychologists' contributions to the experimental verification of relevant psycholinguistic theories; the growth stage yielded fruitful achievements in studies on language cognitive processing and second language acquisition; and the maturity stage expanded the application of psycholinguistics to the psychological processes of interpreting and the rehabilitation of Chinese speakers with aphasia.

Although much endeavor has been undertaken to introduce international studies on psycholinguistics, discuss fundamental issues, and explore its research applications, psycholinguistics in China still faces limitations in both the scope and depth of research. Specifically, psycholinguistic research in China shows clear preferences for certain topics, lacks sufficient empirical evidence, exhibits a time lag in development, has limited access to advanced research techniques, and involves relatively homogeneous academic backgrounds among researchers. In that case, it is of significance to respond to local concerns, broaden research scopes, innovate research paradigms, and involve more interdisciplinary approaches, thus aligning with international developments and exploring a localized developmental path for psycholinguistics in China.

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