

Invitation



The Centre for Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS)
presents

CLASS Seminar Series

Date: Mon, 24 Aug 09
Time: 11.30am -12.30 pm

Venue: HSS Seminar RM 3
(HSS-B1-10)

"The Artificial Boundary of Humanities and Science: Arguments from Linguistics and Literature"

by

A/P Wee Lian Hee

Abstract of talk

Engrained in our consciousness, language and literature are humanities subjects, sadly often typified by people who admit to being bad at mathematics and science. Conversely, students of physics, chemistry, etc sometimes look askance at perceived humanities subjects as a lot of fluff with no empirical basis. But consider for example Da Vinci, Kurt Vonnegut, Noam Chomsky, Thomas Pynchon, etc, and we easily see how they defy easy classification. This begs the question: Is human intellectual wisdom to be bifurcated into humanities and science, or did we just inherit this somewhat too unquestioningly? To answer this question, this talk will focus on two aspects.

Firstly, on the matter of methodology. Contrary to popular belief, experimentation does not characterize science, as can be seen in astronomy. Likewise, literature is not devoid of experimentation. In fact, the most thought-provoking literary creations are often Gedankenexperiments of sorts, a strategy that dates back at least to Galileo who got his audience to envisage flying cannonballs tied to an imaginary string. What characterizes science is the observation-hypothesis-testing spiral, where hypotheses or theories are evaluated on grounds of empiricity, generality and simplicity. Linguistics and literature (comprising both creation and analysis) build models of cognition, life and value in much the same way. Differences between literature and physics really stem from the object of inquiry not method of inquiry. Thus in terms of methodologies, the science-humanities boundary is mythical.

Second, on the parameter of subjectivity and objectivity. Is linguistic and literary research subjective? The issue becomes exciting when collective subjectivity enters into the picture. Consider the experience of coldness in winter. Experience of cold is not objective, rather it is subjective, and in this case collectively so. The objective correlate would be the density of mercury (or other physical correlates) and the electrical signals traveling to the brain. Does a robot with similar electrical networks experience cold? Heated metals cannot tell physicists their subjective experiences, but humans in heat can while their behaviors are also observable. Having both objective and subjective data is a plus that makes for more rigorous study. Consequently, the boundary between science and humanities is entirely artificial if one can see how linguistics and literature are really also built on the same principles of rational argumentation and their necessary relation to empirical observations.

Biography

Lian Hee aspired to be a musician, but was judged at a music competition to have a terrible sense of pitch and timing. Still fascinated with sounds, he pursued phonology to a doctorate degree at the Linguistics Department at Rutgers University. Since then, he has worked as a research fellow at City University of Hong Kong and as an Assistant Professor at the National University of Singapore, before moving to the Hong Kong Baptist University where he now serves as Associate Professor. His most recent work includes "Reality Exploration and Discovery: Pattern Interaction in Language and Life" published this year by CSLI Publications at Stanford where he served as an editor. Till date, Lian Hee is an author of two books, a few book chapters and a number of journal articles in the area of theoretical linguistics focussing mostly on the Chinese languages as well as the Englishes of Singapore and Hong Kong. When not doing phonology, he still likes music with wine, beer, food and cheer.