

Cantonese and Mandarin: Different Dialects or Different Languages?

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.speakers of Cantonese and Mandarin will tell you that they speak the same language. However, if one speaker knows only Cantonese and the other only Mandarin, they will not be able to converse with each other: they actually speak different languages, certainly as different as German and Dutch and even Portuguese and Italian. If the speakers are literate, however, they will be able to communicate with each other through a shared writing system. They will almost certainly insist that they speak different *dialects* of Chinese, not different *languages*.

[Wardhaugh, R. (2008, 6th ed.) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, p.32]

How do we decide whether different language varieties should be regarded as [a] different **languages** or [b] different **dialects** of the same language? To what extent can this be decision made on the basis of *linguistic* factors, and to what extent on the basis of *social* factors? Discuss, with reference to a particular linguistic context with which you are familiar.

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1.0 Introduction

Despite widespread usage by both language users and linguists, the exact meaning of the terms *language* and *dialect* can be somewhat unclear. The following paper investigates the extent to which languages and dialects differ, and aims to identify some of the wider issues that inform the distinction between the two.

Central to this paper is the need to clarify at what point languages converge or diverge, and whether it is possible to establish criteria by which dialects and languages can be defined. In doing this, it will be necessary to examine both the internal and external factors that drive the linguistic choices of a speech community or nation.

Focusing on the properties of both spoken and written discourse, the paper will explore the history of the terms as well as the linguistic and social implications of their contemporary usage in order to determine what distinguishes a language from a dialect. This paper primarily draws on examples found in the United Kingdom to illustrate these points.

By examining the nature and development of language and dialect within this linguistic context, this paper seeks to further clarify the terms and to shed light on the extent to which these factors have influenced our understanding of what *language* and *dialect* are and what they have come to symbolise.

2.0 Defining language

The identification... of languages is greatly hampered by the ambiguities and obscurities attaching to the terms “language” and “dialect.” (Haugen 1966).

Although many generalisations have been made, there seems to be little consensus on the exact concept of language (Shibbles 1995). Smith and Wilson (1979) broadly describe language as the 'grouping together [of] speakers with broadly similar grammars', while Wardhaugh (2008, citing Ferguson 1972:30) refers to:

"any variety of human speech patterns that is sufficiently homogeneous... which has a sufficiently large repertory of elements... with broad enough scope to function in all format contexts of communication."

These basic definitions come from a purely system-based perspective and are concerned with a series of linguistic choices that unite and hence define a speech community. Labov (1972) describes these communities not just as adoptees of the same elements of language – lexicon, grammar, sound inventory, phonological systems – but as a group who have established conventions and norms over time as to what constitutes 'correct' usage of the language between its members.

2.1 Mutual intelligibility

There are many ways to reach a definition of language. An approach considered by some scholars is to weigh them on the grounds of comprehension (Kurpaska 2010), i.e. with any given language being unintelligible to those who do not speak it and therefore distinct from others. This uses the *sound* of a language – the selection and organisation of phonemes, lexis and syntax – as a criterion for differentiating one from another (Mané 2012).

Of course, an aural form of classification is most useful in cases where languages stem from different 'families', as in many cases they will have acquired markedly different linguistic modes (Yule 2010). Working on this premise it is possible to distinguish Arabic, Korean and English, for instance, as different languages.

However, linguists have previously illustrated some of the limitations to this approach, citing the relationship between Scandinavian countries as an example (Wardhaugh 2008; Chambers and Trudgill 2008). Even though Norwegian, Swedish and Danish are generally regarded as being discrete languages, many speakers are able to communicate with each other with relatively little difficulty or misinterpretation. The inverse can also be true within a single language: consider world Englishes - Singaporean English, Indian English and so on - which are said to be variants under the banner of 'English', but each possess idiosyncratic and sometimes non-compatible features (Mané 2012).

2.2 Modes of communication

While this paper has until now only made reference to the characteristics of spoken discourse, the difficulty in accurately defining language is compounded by factors such as the medium over which communication takes place. For instance, Cantonese and Mandarin in their written forms are, for the most part, mutually intelligible, but they differ significantly in their rules of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary when spoken (Wardhaugh 2008; Zhang 1998). If, as is the case in Chinese script, characters bear no direct relation to their phonological features, then the using aforementioned approach would give the false impression that they are the same language only when written. Consequently, this raises the question of whether users of both varieties of Chinese are in effect bilingual (Weinreich 1979).

2.3 A scale of intelligibility

It is possible to identify other limitations of an intelligibility-centred assessment of language. A language can exist in a number of related varieties, but at what point can the variations be seen to constitute a new language? At what degree of intelligibility – for, as Hudson (1980) and Yule (2010) claim, it should be seen as a *scale* – do languages converge or diverge?

Citing the work of Sussure (1983), Pateman (1987) questions whether in variations of the same language, comprehensibility should be derived at the broader level of meaning or the narrower level of linguistic units. In the case of Cantonese and Mandarin this would make them different languages; the same would be true of Standard American English and Standard British English, where there are many differences in semantic and phonological features (Rivens Mompean 1997).

However, there seems to be an inherent confusion if the term *language* can be used to describe both a single set of linguistic conventions (e.g. the English language) and also a group of related ones (e.g. varieties of English).

It would appear that the difficulties that arise when talking about what a language *is* stem from the fact that language often functions in a continuum in which linguistic differences are most salient at its extremes, rather than being governed by any absolute, concrete or uniform criteria.

3.0 Defining dialect

In their study of language convergence and divergence, Auer, Hinskens and Kerswill (2005) describe dialect as:

'a language variety which is used in a geographically limited part of a language area... a dialect typically displays structural peculiarities in several language components.'

Wardhaugh (2008) refers to both 'a local variety' of a language and 'various types of informal or lower-class speech'.

Haugen (1966: 922-3) reports that some of the earliest uses of the term *dialect* were in reference to the language varieties found in writings from Ancient Greece. With each dialect having a specific function in Greek culture (e.g. literature, drama and tragedy, choral lyrics, poetry, historical texts and so on) they were, as early as the 16th century, considered to be closely related norms for communication. It was later, after many of these dialects converged to form what would be called 'Greek', that they would be looked upon as Greek dialects, in so much as being subordinates of a single language.

3.1 The features of a dialect

Dialects are said to develop when people of a common language are spread geographically or socially, developing differences in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar (Holmes 2008; Trudgill and Watt 2012; Auer et al 2005). In the case of China, those who consider both Mandarin and Cantonese as dialects will point to their origins in the north and southwest respectively, where they each developed over centuries from the root of the

Sinitic language family (Zhang 1998, Lai 2001). This is by no means an empirical assertion, as it would erroneously make languages such as English and Urdu into dialects of the same tongue based on their linguistic genealogy (Bouckaert et al 2012; Giacalone Ramat and Ramat, 1998).

It is in the practical application of the word dialect that contradictions begin to appear. Haugen (1966:924) observes that in the United Kingdom it is customary to talk of a Yorkshire dialect and so on, but not a London dialect (it should be noted that according to Wells (1992) and Altendorf (2003), Cockney represents a specific regional variation of London English rather than a city-wide dialect). Wardhaugh (2008) cites the French word *dialekte*, which is not used in connection with the standard language - that is to say, Standard French is not generally thought of as a dialect of French. Similarly, the aforementioned studies by Haugen found that Americans are usually resentful of being told they speak an 'American dialect' of the English language.

Previous studies have presented dialects as secondary - Holmes (2008) and Mané (2012) amongst others - and consequently it is unsurprising that they have come to be defined by what they lack. It is rare that a dialect will have a codified form or be used in literature outside of creative or intentionally stylised writing (Garrett 1995).

3.2 Perceptions of dialect

In everyday use, the term *dialect* appears to be a loaded one, detailing more than just a locally shared verbal repertoire. For one, it is often employed as a demarcation tool separating those whose linguistic choices are thought to denote an inferior education, membership of a lower class or lesser social standing (Holmes 2008; Shibbles 2005). The findings of these and other studies - including Wardhaugh (2008) and Furfey (1944:3) - point towards a similarly negative perception of dialect speakers in comparison to those who adopt the more prestigious standard language.

From this perspective it is possible to distinguish dialects from languages in terms of how they allow speakers to be perceived by others (Bochner and Bochner 1973), with greater

credence and credibility afforded to those whose speech conforms to the norms of a standardised or idealised form.

At this point it is worth mentioning that what constitutes prestige in one country can indicate the exact opposite in another country. Labov (2006) cited the use of /r/ before consonants as an example. In English speakers residing in New York this phonological feature is considered an indication of high social standing, but in the South West of England it is viewed as a rustic and naïve-sounding throwback (Hughes et al 2012).

3.3 Models of language

In the United Kingdom the model dialect is Standard English. Its reach includes (and is by no means limited to) news media, the British education system and, by extension, schools worldwide where British English is taught. It is widely published in 'authoritative' scholarly publications such as dictionaries, grammar guides and textbooks, as well as creative literature and non-fiction (Bright 1960).

There are a number of phonological, morphological and grammatical ways in which Standard English differs from other dialects: some of the most apparent distinctions involve multiple negation, relative and personal pronouns, and past tense irregular verbs (Hughes et al 2012).

From an educational perspective, there are benefits to applying a paradigm in language; a degree of uniformity can help accelerate the acceptance stage of language planning (Holmes 2008) and, superficially at least, it provides a single linguistic 'interface' for speakers of other languages to engage with (Haugen 1966). However, it is important to note that the aforementioned differences do not *in themselves* demonstrate that a language is any more expressive or developed than a dialect, or vice versa (Milroy 1999).

4.0 Recognising social factors

That social factors should be considered at all when discussing language and dialect is widely accepted (Haugen 1966; Weinreich 1979; Wilson and Henry 1998; Spolsky 2010). The work of Labov (1972, 2006) in New York and Coupland (1988) in Cardiff, South Wales demonstrates the extent to which a person's speech can be used to make judgements on the many facets of their identity.

Generally speaking, dialects are not perceived using solely linguistic parameters. If a *dialect* has been chosen as the standard it gains enhanced status as a standardised *language*. The resulting effect, whether inadvertent or not, is that all others are demoted to being localised and socially inferior variations (Weinreich 1979): this reinforces the observation made earlier by Haugen of dialect being subordinate to language.

The concept of a 'linguistic elite' is not limited to centres of administrative or financial power. As Fischer (1958), Lai (2001) and Yeager-Dror (1986) note, even in apparently 'undifferentiated' societies, it is those who possess the most desirable traits, be they technical skills or productivity, that are most likely to set the standard in terms of dialectical prestige.

4.1 Social demarcation

A language can also be identified through its use as a vehicle for social stratification, where assimilation grants a user access to a better-educated, more influential speech community (the extensive research carried out by Labov (2006) explains this phenomenon in detail). Whether or not it is intentional, this outlook can result in the adoption of a dialect excluding the speaker from what are thought to be more cultured spheres of communication (Bex 1999:91).

Trudgill (1983, reiterated in Holmes 2008) demonstrates that there are strong social aspects to the notion of dialect in particular. He asserts that social variation and the need for speakers to affirm their status produces *sociolects*, a variety of a language used by a given social class. Based on Trudgill's theory, it is quite possible to describe Standard English as a social

construct, a sociolect separate from the non-standard dialects that can be heard throughout the United Kingdom.

Interestingly, while Standard English is considered to have greater prestige, the extent to which it is heard in spheres of influence is diminishing slightly (Holmes 2008) – or conversely, it could be said that greater credence is being given to dialects. In recent years, it has become more commonplace to hear them in mainstream news broadcasting and national politics.

5.0 Language and identity

The dynamic between the terms dialect and language also merits investigation. While a country may only speak a handful of languages officially, within the country – within the language - there will be a continuum of geographical dialects. These often straddle national borders and in some cases create variations that are not always intelligible with the languages from which they are derived (Mané 2012). Standard German, and the many High and Low German dialects spoken across the country and on the borders of neighbour states are a case in point. Within each speech community, it is possible to express a kind of solidarity through the use of these dialects that cannot be achieved in the same way with standard language.

5.1 Language policy

In the UK, the concept of a standard-bearing dialect is firstly a historical and power-based construct (Milroy 1999). What is now codified as Standard English gained esteem during the Middle English period in the Midlands, in Oxford and Cambridge, and in London. It is in no way serendipitous that the exemplar dialect came out of the country's most powerful regions in terms of the labour force (at least at that time), education centres and political influence respectively. Likewise with China, Mandarin derived from the dialect of the nation's capital, Beijing.

These examples highlight how one dialect, when elevated to being a standardised language, is presented as an authority: it establishes a single model of what is believed to be correct language in comparison to what is 'ungrammatical' or incorrect (Milroy 1999). They also show the power of policy in determining what is a language and what is a dialect. Kurpaska (2010) observes that Chinese authorities have, in the past, gone so far as to devise 'language laws' governing exactly when, and for what purposes, the use of dialects is permissible in official and cultural affairs. While other countries may not adopt such an exacting approach, it is clear that the perceived status of a language variety can be solidified by its inclusion or exclusion in language policy.

5.2 Language as symbolism

In rejecting a purely linguistic view of language, Weinreich (1979) puts forward the idea of it being a symbol of group identity. It is necessary to examine the factors or traits act as unifying and dividing forces in this regard.

The Chinese government's endorsement of Mandarin as *Standard Chinese* ranks it above the range of dialects spoken across the country, including the Cantonese *dialect*. Although in the UK Standard English has not received official designation, a similar 'dominant' model has been established. This is said to have the effect of equating language and a nation, linking its people more closely with a single, cohesive vision about how, through language, the country can and should represent itself (Woolard and Schiefflin 1994:60).

However, the desire for a unifying voice does not negate the fact that Standard English is not the native dialect of most British people (Shibbles 1995). Citizens may look to the standardised language as the mode of education and privilege (Garrett 1995), and its norms may exert a sometimes-tangible pressure on dialect speakers in formal interactions, but many of those who are affected by and adopt it simply code-switch from their primary dialect (Mufwene 2004a; Yule 2010). As such, standard language can justifiably be considered something of an ideal, with localised variations existing alongside it (Kurpaska 2010).

5.3 Nation-building

The selection of a language also has great power in what is referred to as 'nation-building', whereby a common identity is constructed by the state with the purpose of unifying its subjects. This is particularly of interest in newly independent states (Holmes 2008). Afrikaans was regarded as reduced dialect of Dutch, but became a symbol of social progress and a de facto language (complete with an orthography and its own standardised grammar) in the years following the Union of South Africa in 1910 (Roberge 1992). In the states that succeeded the former Yugoslavia, struggles for language recognition have been one of the most overt forms of nationalism even though, in the case of Serbian and Croatian, the grammatical differences are said to be negligible (Wright 2000).

The case of Breton provides a contrast to the rallying effect described above. A variety of Celtic used exclusively in Northern France, some speakers view Breton as a symbol of the desire for separatism and regional autonomy from the rest of the country (Wardhaugh 2008). Perhaps as a result of this, Breton receives no official recognition from the French central government, and while it may elicit feelings of commonality and resistance within the region, the apparent conflict of loyalty – a refusal to defer to the power of the nation and *its* language - leaves Breton at risk of becoming obsolete (Mufwene 2004b).

However idealistic it may be in practice, there is great significance and power in language as a social tool. Just as identity becomes bound with language in the process of nation-building, it is not unreasonable to think that other non-linguistic concerns can influence whether a person is said to be speaking a language or a dialect (Wright 2000). Mané (2012) supports the notion that addressing wider issues such as these is often seen as the role of a language rather than a dialect.

However, the decision of dialect or language is made, it is clear that majority rule does not necessarily dictate the outcome (Shibbles 1995). In almost all cases, one particular dialect – having the same degree of linguistic functionality as the others – will be upheld as a benchmark (Bex 1999:90) and, in the case of Standard British English, will be routinely taught to British citizens and foreign language learners around the world.

6.0 Conclusion

The relationship between language and dialect is a fluid and complex one. When conceptualising them, it is useful to begin from a solid linguistic base, but purely language-based evidence is not in itself sufficient in helping us reach clear definitions.

Identifying language as merely a systematic means of enabling communication between different speech communities provides a picture that is, at best, underdeveloped. Its osmotic nature, as it rejects and absorbs influences from a variety of external sources, escapes such simplistic pigeonholing. In the majority of cases addressed or referenced in this paper, lines of inclusion and exclusion have been drawn through nations, communities and societies on the basis of both linguistic *and* social factors. The influence of these extra-linguistic motivations cannot be underestimated.

It is possible to argue that the marked difference in the lives and fates of languages and dialects - specifically the proliferation of the former and stigmatisation of the latter - is in effect a form of dominance, the spread of which is evidence of its power.

As Williams (1977:21) asserts, 'a definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world'; that there might be any neutrality in the differentiation between language and dialect is hard to comprehend. The decision belies the many political, educational and social intentions of the 'gatekeepers' or 'guardians' of a language, be they lexicographers, political leaders, educational, religious or financial institutions or even a social elite (Fischer 1999).

Ultimately, it is important to recognise that a language encapsulates far more than mere linguistic function, and should always be framed in the geographical, political and social context in which it operates. It is possible that languages could be portrayed as ideologies, a set of cultural and politically informed beliefs about communication that are 'encoded or enacted through language' (Woolard and Schiefflin 1994). It is through these ideologies that speakers articulate or assert their position in the value systems that quietly but no less powerfully govern almost all areas of their discourse.

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