

Languages, Dialects and Language Varieties

Session 2

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Sociolinguistics 1

off the mark.com by Mark Parisi

A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IS TOUGH ENOUGH WITHOUT HAVING TO LEARN DIALECTS...

WOOF WOOF
ARF ARF
ROWF YAP

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There are many popular ideas about

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I DON'T KNOW THE NATIONALITY OF THE FLAG-SAR ... BUT HE SAYS HE'S TAKEN OVER THE TRAFFIC ISLAND... DECLARED IT A SEPARATE STATE... AND WANTS HIS LINGO TO BE MADE THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE

FIG 8.1 New languages as acts of identity

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What's a "language"?
What's a "dialect"?

You are all learning to be linguists...

What do you think?

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What's a "language"?
What's a "dialect"?

Today we will be thinking together about how difficult defining such terms can be... and hopefully agreeing on a definition

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"Do you speak a dialect?"

- **MYTH:** A dialect is something that **SOMEONE ELSE** speaks.
- **REALITY:** Everyone who speaks a language speaks some dialect of the language; it is not possible to speak a language without speaking a dialect of the language.

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Different People, Different Definitions (criteria) for language vs. dialect

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What's a "language"? What's a "dialect"?

(Popular) definition 1:

A "language" is *larger* than a "dialect"

- Criterion: SIZE
- Each "language" exists in a number of varieties; the language is the sum of those varieties.

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But what about...

➤ Bisu in northern Thailand...language or dialect?

- Approximately 700 speakers
- Unlike any other language in the area

➤ Canadian English...language or dialect?

- Approximately 10 million speakers
- Identical grammar to most other English dialects, 100% comprehensibility
- Unique pronunciation, final particle "-eh"

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What's a "language"? What's a "dialect"?

(Popular) definition 2:

A "language" is *better* than a "dialect"

- Criterion: PRESTIGE
- The prestige dialect is the language; everything else is a *non-standard* or *sub-standard* "dialect"

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"Language", "Dialect" and language attitudes

➤ In many languages, "Language" has more prestige than "dialect"

➤ E.g., French:

"Langue" — Standard French, esp. the written standard based on Paris speech

"Dialecte" — a regional variety with a written tradition

"Patois" — a regional variety without a written tradition

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Standard vs. non-standard

➤ Standard English [or any other language] is that variety which is usually used in print, and which is normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers. It is also the variety which is normally spoken by educated people and used in news broadcasts and other similar situations. (Trudgill 1995:5)

➤ Standard=more prestige

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What's a "language"? What's a "dialect"?

(Popular) definition 3:
The people who speak a "language" are *more powerful* than those who speak a "dialect"

- Criterion: POWER
- The dialect spoken by the ruling class is the language; everything else is a "dialect"

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We speak English here,
understand...?

**"A language is a dialect
with an army and a navy"**

What's a "language"? What's a "dialect"?

(Chinese) Definition 4:
A language is the speech variety of a group characterized by political unity and a shared writing system

- Criterion: POLITICAL/EDUCATIONAL UNITY

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The Chinese experience

Many dialects, but one language...

The unique Chinese alphabet

Doesn't work in many other places

<http://www.uwcsea.edu.sg/newsdesk/23may03/images/chinese.jpg>
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What's a "language"? What's a "dialect"?

(More "linguistic") Definition 5:
Languages and Dialects can be distinguished by the test of *mutual intelligibility*

- Criterion: COMPREHENSION

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The intelligibility test...

- If people speaking different language varieties *can* communicate with each other, the varieties are *mutually intelligible*, therefore different dialects of a single language.
- If people speaking different language varieties *cannot* communicate with each other, the varieties are *mutually unintelligible*, therefore they belong to different languages.

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Problems with the criterion of mutual intelligibility

- Some “dialects” of different languages are mutually intelligible.
- Some “dialects” of some languages are mutually incomprehensible
- Dialect continua
- Comprehension is often greater in one direction than the other (eg. Lao Pan and Phu Noi)

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Some “dialects” of different languages are mutually intelligible

- “Dialects” of Dutch and German along the Germany-Netherlands border are mutually comprehensible
- Same for French & Italian

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Worse, some “languages” are mutually intelligible

- Hindi and Urdu (“Hindustani”)
- Serbian and Croatian (“Serbo-Croatian”)
- Norwegian, Danish & Swedish are mutually comprehensible among educated speakers
- Lao and N.E. Thai (Isan)

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Mutually intelligible “languages”

	Hindi	Urdu	Serbian	Croatian
Country	India	Pakistan	Serbia	Croatia
Main Religion	Hinduism	Islam	Orthodox Christianity	Roman Catholicism
Script	Devanagri	Arabic	Cyrillic	Roman
Lexifier Lg.	Sanskrit	Arabic/Farsi	Greek	Latin

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Mutually incomprehensible “dialects”

- Chinese
 - Mandarin, Cantonese, Wu (Shanghai), etc.
- Some English dialects
 - American vs. Scottish
 - General American vs. African-American Vernacular English

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Dialect continua

- E.g., Karenic languages in Thailand & Myanmar:
 - No sharp boundaries between “languages”
 - W. Bwe ↔ Kayaw ↔ W. Kayah ↔ E. Kayah, but W. Bwe ←//→ E. Kayah
- Africa:
 - Bantu languages from Cameroon to S. Africa
- Europe:
 - Dutch ... German ... Austrian German
 - French ... Piedmontese ... N. Italian ... S. Italian

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Can we distinguish dialects by shared linguistic features?

- Usually...certain features are generally perceived as characteristic of particular dialects
- But languages can borrow characteristics from unrelated languages that are spoken in that area
- Borrowing can occur...
 - Lexically
 - Grammatically
 - Phonologically

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“Language” and “Dialect”: the importance of social factors

- “The criterion of ‘mutual intelligibility’, and other purely linguistic criteria, are ... of less importance in the use of the terms language and dialect than are *political and cultural factors* ...” (Trudgill 1995:4, my italics)

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Some usable definitions...

- From p. 1 of Wardaugh...
 - Let us say a *society* is any group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes...
 - A *language* is what the members of a particular society speak
 - A *dialect* is a subordinate variety of a language (W40)
- Although this definition is not without problems, it is the one we will use

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“Dialect” vs. “Accent”

- *Accent*: refers solely to differences of phonology or phonetics between language varieties
- *Dialect*: differences of vocabulary and grammar, as well as pronunciation, between language varieties

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Another term...

Language Variety or Speech Variety

A specific set of ‘linguistic items’ or ‘human speech patterns’ (presumably, sounds, words, grammatical features, etc.) which we can uniquely associate with some external factor (presumably a geographical area or a social group). W25

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So a “language variety” could be...

- Any of the following...
 - a whole language
 - any special subset of a language associated with a particular region or social group
 - the speech of one person (‘idiolect’)
- It is a neutral, generic term for a way people use to communicate. We will use this term often in sociolinguistics

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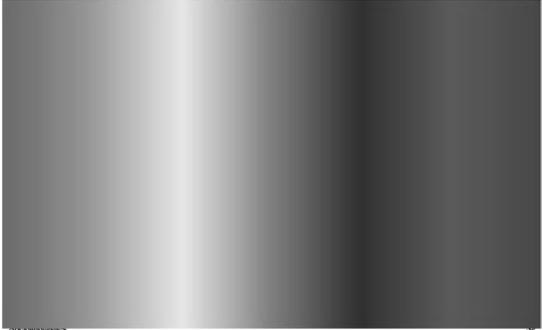
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Language vs. Dialect

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Language vs. Dialect



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Thinking about Speech Varieties in Thailand

- Issan, Kammuang, Tay? Why?
- Akha, Lahu, Karen, Malayu? Why?

- Which criterion is popularly used?
 1. Size
 2. Prestige
 3. Power
 4. Political/educational Unity (China)
 5. Comprehension (Linguistic)

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Homework #1

- Look at the quiz from this morning. After hearing today's lecture, have you changed your mind about any of your answers? Explain why or why not (approx ½ page)

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Homework #2

- Go to the internet. Search for the following words in Thai (exact phrase) In Thai, are the following speech varieties more likely to be called 'language,' 'dialect,' or 'accent'?
- Isarn, Lao, Kammuang, Chiang Mai, Yawi, Malayu, Karen, Akha, Cantonese, Tæjiew

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Sociolinguistics Scrapbook #1

- This week, watch for something in the media (radio, TV, internet, newspapers) that is related to sociolinguistics. If on internet or newspaper, please copy it and bring it to class.

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