

TUTORIAL
5.19

Languages and Dialects

This tutorial looks at the issues surrounding the definition of a *dialect* - what is the difference between a language and a dialect, and how are languages separated?

How many languages are there?

The usual number given is up to about 7,000 languages spoken in the world today. But it is difficult to be certain exactly how many languages there are for a few reasons: we still don't know enough about the linguistic situation in some areas of the world, and it can be difficult to distinguish separate languages from dialects of a single language.

Language and dialect

So what is the difference between a language and a dialect? The term 'dialect' is often misused to mean a non-standard variety of a language, or for indigenous languages spoken by small numbers of people (many of these are actually separate languages).

The technical, linguistic definition of the distinction between 'language' and 'dialect' involves the principle of *mutual intelligibility*.

- If two groups of people speak differently from one another, but can still understand one another, then they are speaking different dialects of one language.
- If two groups of people speak differently from one another, and they cannot understand one another, then they are speaking different languages.

Dialects are different, but *mutually intelligible varieties of a language*.

For example, if someone who speaks Australian English meets someone from the USA, they will notice that they speak differently – have different pronunciations, use some different words, maybe even some different grammatical structures, but they can still understand each other. So American English and Australian English are different dialects of one language.

But if someone who speaks Australian English meets someone from Germany, they will not be able to understand one another (unless the Australian has learnt German or the German has learnt English). So German and Australian English are separate languages, even though they are very closely related.

The Difficulty with Dialects

This definition of a dialect seems quite simple, but it is a bit more complicated than that... because there is an exception to the general rule:

- If two groups don't understand one another, but there's an unbroken chain of people between them who *do* understand one another, then they are said (by linguists) to be speaking dialects in a continuum that belongs to a single language.

For example, if someone from Sydney meets someone from Glasgow speaking Scottish English, and someone from New Orleans speaking Louisiana English, they would have a lot of difficulty understanding one another. Does this mean that Australian, Scottish and Louisiana English are distinct languages? No, because each of these speech varieties are connected by a chain of speakers who can understand one another: e.g. speakers in northern England understand Scottish speakers, speakers in southern England understand speakers in northern England, speakers in Australia understand speakers in southern England. This is called a *dialect continuum*.

There are several dialect continuums in Europe. We usually think there are many languages in Europe - French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, etc. This is because each of these is associated with a different country, and each country has its own 'standard' language. But most of the languages of Europe actually belong to just a few dialect continuums. The languages we just mentioned - French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese - belong to a dialect continuum we call *Western Romance*. It is a continuum because there is no point between Sicily at the bottom of Italy and Lisbon in Portugal where people in one region can't understand people in the neighboring region, even across national boundaries



Romance languages are in green. Western Romance doesn't include Romanian.

like the boundary between France and Italy – there is no point where the chain of mutually intelligible dialects is broken.

This makes it hard to come up with the exact number of languages there are in the world. Should we count Portuguese, Spanish, French and Italian as separate, even though they belong to the Western Romance dialect continuum? If we do, then we are counting different dialects in the same dialect continuum as separate languages, just because they are considered standard languages.

But for most dialect continuums in the world, such as in Africa or in Papua New Guinea, there is no dialect that is considered to be a standard dialect. This means we'd be counting European languages differently (by counting more of them) than those in other parts of the world. If we do count Spanish, French, etc. as separate languages, should we also count Catalan (spoken in southern Spain around Barcelona) and Provençal (spoken in southern France), which are as different as Standard Spanish and Standard French?

Another problem is that in many parts of the world we only know about some of the languages or dialects in a region, but we don't know much about many of the dialects in between – so they could be separate languages, or they could also be linked by a chain of mutually intelligible dialects.

Another issue is when social, cultural or political criteria clash with linguistic criteria. Sometimes one language is treated as several languages by its speakers or their governments. Sometimes when a people group crosses borders, the single language they speak will be called different names in each country. For example, Danish and Swedish are the same language, but the people of Sweden call the language they speak Swedish, and the people of Denmark call the language they speak Danish, and these are the official names of the national languages of these countries.

In other cases several languages are treated as one language. Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka and Hokkien are all officially treated as dialects of one language - 'Chinese' - even though they are not mutually intelligible. So should these all be counted as one language? In Fiji there are two indigenous languages (each separate dialect continuums) - Western Fijian and Eastern Fijian - but all are usually referred to by their speakers and by the government as dialects of 'Fijian'.

Problems with mutual intelligibility

Another reason it is difficult to accurately count the world's languages is because there are some complications with the idea of mutual intelligibility. One problem is that dialects that are part of the same continuum may have unequal relationships to one another.

For example, Australians are used to hearing a lot of American English through movies and television, but most Americans have seen few, if any, Australian movies or television, or met Australians, so they are not used to hearing Australian English. Australians are more likely to understand Americans, but those same Americans might not understand them.

Another problem is that it is difficult to get a true understanding of how much mutual intelligibility there actually is, because there are often identity issues involved when people are asked if they understand or speak another language. For example, where there is a dominant language, speakers of the dominant group might say they do not understand the speech of members of the non-dominant group.

In many places in Africa there may be several languages and dialects spoken in an area, but one will be more dominant than the others. Often speakers of the subordinate languages will say they understand the more dominant one, but speakers of the dominant language will not admit to understanding any of the others. This situation follows directly from issues such as the economic and political dominance of the speakers of the dominant language. These attitudes are not unusual, which makes testing mutual intelligibility very difficult.

The same pattern is found within the Scandinavian dialect continuum. Danes claim to be able to understand Norwegians, much better than Norwegians claim to be able to understand Danes.

Languages and speakers

So, we have established that it is difficult to be accurate when counting the world's languages - but we do know that there are approximately 7,000 truly separate languages in the world.

These are not distributed evenly, either geographically, or in numbers of speakers. Some regions have a very high concentration of languages (e.g. West Africa, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Amazonia and the Caucuses). Others have a low number of languages (areas of low density are often areas where colonization has taken place and a dominant language has become firmly established, while others have been lost).

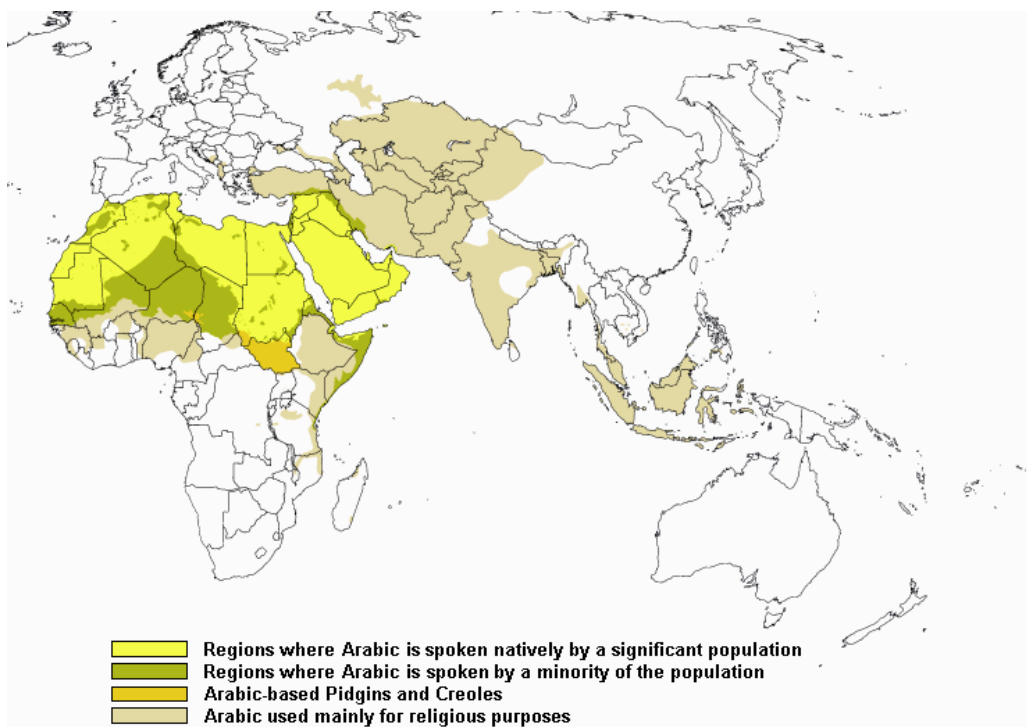
If languages were distributed evenly, each language would have about 1 million speakers - but that is not the reality at all. The number of speakers of languages varies very widely. A few languages have a great number of speakers - 389 languages (6%) have more than 1 million speakers. 94% of the world population speak only 6% of world languages. Just 6% of the world population speak 94% of languages.

Approximate numbers for the 10 languages with over 100 million speakers:

<i>(numbers are in millions)</i>	<i>as first language</i>	<i>as second language</i>
Mandarin	1,000	180
English	350	850
Spanish	350	60
Hindi/Urdu	250	165
Arabic	225	245
Portuguese	220	20
Bengali	200	40
Russian	165	110
Japanese	130	1
German	100	60
Total	2,990	1,731

This chart simplifies what is a very complex picture - as each of these languages is actually a network of dialects. As we know, English is a large, complex dialect network.

Arabic is a dialect continuum. Like Western Romance in Europe, it has some country-specific standard varieties. Speakers of Moroccan Arabic at one end of the continuum and speakers of Iraqi Arabic at the other end would not be able to understand each other, but there is no point between Morocco and Iraq where a chain of mutually intelligible dialects is broken. (Many Arabic speakers also speak Classical Arabic, which links them.) If we count Arabic as one language and add up all its speakers, then to be consistent we should do the same with the European dialect continuums. We should really count Western Romance as one language with 715 million first language speakers.



The language with the greatest number of speakers, referred to as 'Mandarin', consists of a huge number of dialects, many of which are not mutually intelligible. There are eight main Mandarin dialect areas in mainland China (in bold below), and each of these areas contains other related dialects:

Beijing mandarin: Beijing dialect, Standard Mandarin, Chengde dialect, Chifeng dialect, Hailar dialect, Karamay dialect

Ji Lu Mandarin: Baoding dialect, Jinan dialect, Shijiazhuang dialect, Tianjin dialect

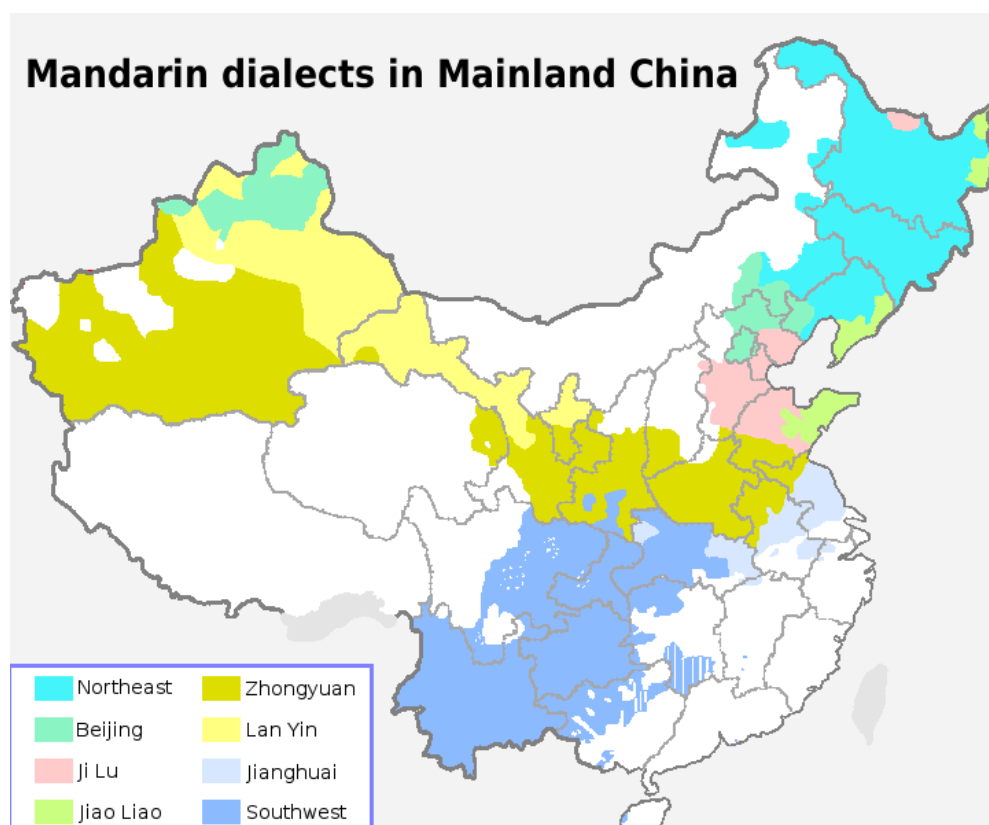
Jianghuai Mandarin: Hefei dialect, Hainan Junjiahua, Nanjing dialect, Nantong dialect, Xiaogan dialect, Yangzhou dialect, Jiao Liao Mandarin, Dalian dialect, Qingdao dialect, Weihai dialect, Yantai dialect

Lan Yin Mandarin: Dungan language, Lanzhou dialect, Urumqi dialect of Chinese, Xining dialect, Yinchuan dialect

North-east China Mandarin: Changchun dialect, Harbin dialect, Qiqihar dialect, Shenyang dialect

South-western Mandarin: Changde dialect, Chengdu dialect, Chongqing dialect, Dali dialect, Guiyang dialect, Kunming dialect, Liuzhou dialect, Wuhan dialect, Xichang dialect, Yichang dialect

Zhongyuan Mandarin: Hanzhong dialect, Kaifeng dialect, Kashgar dialect of Chinese, Luoyang dialect, Nanyang dialect, Qufu dialect, Tianshui dialect, Xi'an dialect, Xuzhou dialect, Yan'an dialect, Zhengzhou dialect





In contrast to Mandarin and the other very large languages mentioned above, most languages in the world have only a few thousand or even a few hundred speakers. Many have just a handful of very elderly speakers, like the Aboriginal language Gajirrabeng which is now spoken only by one old lady living in Western Australia (at left).

Estimates predict that between 50% and 90% of all languages in the world will die out within this century. It is estimated that on average, every two weeks, a language somewhere in the world falls into disuse.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Languages and Dialects

1. What do you think about language death? What is being lost? Should we set out to preserve languages? How does it relate to communicating Truth?



ACTIVITIES

Languages and Dialects

1. The tutorial mentioned that Australian and American English are different dialects of English. Write down some examples of different pronunciations, words or grammatical structures in a comparison table. (You could use another dialect of English you are more familiar with for your comparison.)
2. Find a website that has a map of the world's endangered languages. Choose one of these languages and try to research some more information about it (e.g. Why is it endangered, what languages are replacing it, is anything being done to preserve it? etc.)

3. Below are some words used in British or American English for which a different word is used in Australian English. Try to identify if the word is British or American and then give the Australian equivalent.
- faucet
 - dungarees
 - cookie
 - push-chair
 - aubergine
 - monkey wrench
 - fall (season)
 - bobby
 - pacifier
 - drugstore
 - diaper
 - anorak
 - electric fire
 - sophomore

(Answers on next page)

Answers:

Word	British or American?	Australian Equivalent
faucet	American English	<i>tap</i>
dungarees	British English	<i>jeans</i>
cookie	American English	<i>biscuit, bikkie</i>
push-chair	British English	<i>pram, stroller</i>
aubergine	British English	<i>eggplant</i>
monkey wrench	American English	<i>adjustable spanner, pipe wrench</i>
fall (season)	American English	<i>autumn</i>
bobby	British English	<i>policeman</i>
pacifier	American English	<i>dummy</i>
drugstore	American English	<i>chemist</i>
diaper	American English	<i>nappy</i>
anorak	British English (from Eskimo: <i>anoraq</i>)	<i>warm jacket/coat</i> <i>parka (from Aleut via Russian)</i>
electric fire	British English	<i>(electric) heater</i>
sophomore	American English	<i>year 10 high school student</i>