

Language Transmission, Language Acquisition, and Dialect Formation

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Abstract

The history of language is the history of language transmission. The successful transmission of language relies on two basic criteria: the biologically determined language faculty of individuals and the successful acquisition of language by individuals. The former is genetically or vertically transmitted whereas the latter is culturally or horizontally transmitted.

Since the history of language is in essence the history of its own transmission, we have to understand how languages are transmitted or acquired by individuals in order to better our understanding of language history. It is necessary, therefore, that the basic facts we observe in the study of language acquisition must have their significance in the study of language history.

It is well understood that second language learning is imperfect. Interlanguage (imperfectly learned language) is a normal learning result. The imperfection is largely from the first language; this is exactly what we found in the Chinese dialects. Specific dialectal features are often similar to the features of their linguistic neighbors.

Our analyses of Chinese dialects suggest that different Chinese dialects are the results of imperfect learning of the Chinese language throughout history by various groups of non-Chinese speakers in different geographical regions. In retrospect, it is inevitable that when the Chinese language spreads into the non-Han language-speaking areas due to political, cultural, and linguistic pressures, non-Han people will drop their language and gradually shift to the Chinese language. In the process their first (non-Chinese) language features will inevitably be carried over to the Chinese language they learned. The imperfectly learned Chinese language then becomes a local variation, or a new Chinese dialect.

Based on the cross-language comparison and multidisciplinary approach we would like to propose a new hypothesis: the formation of Chinese dialects is through language shift. The Chinese dialects are mainly various forms of imperfect learning by non-Chinese language speakers historically. As the causes of the changes are external, the formation of Chinese dialects is the result of cultural transmission or, in other words, the result of “horizontal transmission”.