

Mandarin Chinese – the Role of Migration and Language Contact in Its Development

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to present a brief description of Mandarin, as it is the official language of China, and native speakers of Mandarin comprise by far the largest group of people in the world who speak the same language.

Key Words: Mandarin Chinese, Migrant, Development

1. INTRODUCTION

When I was asked about my job I used to tell people that I taught Chinese in a secondary school. Some people would ask, “Mandarin or Cantonese?” and my pupils sometimes ask me questions like “Do you speak Mandarin at home? Does everyone in China speak Mandarin?” I realised then that the term “Chinese” requires clarification.

The purpose of this paper is to present a brief description of Mandarin, as it is the official language of China, and native speakers of Mandarin comprise by far the largest group of people in the world who speak the same language. The following three aspects of the language will be discussed: the classification of the language; its historical development and geographic range; its standard form and varieties. I am going to attempt to define Chinese and Mandarin Chinese first, and then use historical evidence to explain the geographic range of modern Mandarin. In the process I will draw on evidence from the historical development of English. Then I will turn to the variety of Mandarin spoken in Taiwan, where Mandarin was greatly influenced by Min in sentence structure and vocabulary because of contact between the two. Mandarin in Taiwan also shows evidence of Japanese influence due to fifty years of Japanese occupation.

2. CHINESE VS MANDARIN CHINESE

According to DeFrancis (1984), in its application to people the term “Chinese” refers to the segment of the population of China that is called “Han Chinese”, which comprises some 93% of the whole population. In its application to language, the term “Chinese”, or more specifically “spoken Chinese”, refers to the speech of the Han Chinese. A debate thus arises here, because the “Chinese” spoken by the Han Chinese is actually an abstraction that covers eight mutually unintelligible forms of speech, namely Mandarin (Putonghua), Wu, Cantonese, Xiang, Hakka, Southern Min, Northern Min, and Gan.

As many linguists prefer to apply the term “dialect” only to mutually intelligible forms of speech, and consider mutually unintelligible forms as “languages”, the American descriptive linguist Leonard Bloomfield (1933) concluded from this point of view that Chinese is not a single language but a family of languages, made up of a variety of mutually unintelligible languages. It is true that people from Beijing couldn’t understand people from Shanghai or Guangzhou in speech. Kratochvíl (1968) compared the situation of Chinese to a group of related languages in Europe. But he used lots of ‘ifs’ – “If speakers of Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Italian coexisted at the moment in a single political unit, if they had been using Latin as their common written form of communication...” All these ‘ifs’ are just if – the situation never really existed. I therefore find it hard to agree with linguists who define Cantonese and Mandarin as different Languages. Their definition ignores the unique linguistic situation in China. No matter how different the speeches are, Chinese or at least the Han Chinese shares the same written form. How could we just forget about the written form when we talk about a language?

However, I agree with Defrancis that we cannot simply call Cantonese or Hakka a dialect. Thus a possible solution, as Defrancis(1984:57) explains, might be to adopt the Chinese designation ‘fangyan’ which literally means ‘regional speech’ or coin an abbreviation such as ‘regionalect’ for the mutually unintelligible varieties of Chinese. The term ‘dialect’ can then be reserved for its usual function of designating mutually intelligible subvarieties of the regionalects. In that case we could say that Chinese language comprises eight ‘fangyan’(regionalects) which are Mandarin, Wu, Cantonese, Xiang, Hakka, Southern Min, Gan, Northern Min, which share the same written form. Thus Mandarin Chinese is one of the eight regionlects of Chinese.

2.1 The geographic range in Mainland China and its reason

Within the Putonghua speech community in Mainland China, there are different varieties of Mandarin. Here I adopt Chappell’s description of the geographic range of Mandarin Chinese (2004:10) because his is the latest and fullest.

(i) Northern Mandarin Dialects

Hubei, including Greater Beijing; northern Shandong; Manchuria(Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Jilin); Part of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

(ii) Zhongyuan or central plains Mandarin dialects

southern Shandong; Henan; northern Anhui; Shaanxi, parts of Shanxi; Gansu; Qinghai; Ningxia and Xinjiang.

(iii) North-western Mandarin dialects

areas of Gansu; Xinjiang and Ningxia

(iv) Jiang-huai or Xiajiang (lower Yangzi) Mandarin dialects

Nanjing, most of Jiangsu province north of Yangzi with some dialect islands to the south, central Anhui province and parts of Hubei

(v) South-western Mandarin dialects

Most of Hubei; north-western and south-eastern Hunan; Sichuan; Yunnan; Guizhou; north-western Guangxi

Before I try to analyse the reason for the geographic range of Mandarin, I will first consider a similar phenomenon in the development of English. We all know that there are different varieties of English today. The reason is that “English has been brought into contact with new environments and languages” (Culpeper 2005:95) These varieties are mutually intelligible although they sound sometimes different and they have some different vocabularies or even some difference in grammars, however, they share the same (if not exactly the same) written form. How did this happen? Could this be possible without large-scale population movement or migration in history? Take American English for example, “it was the early colonists who

brought the speech, and established its form, and those who came later during the three great periods of European immigration were largely assimilated in a generation or two” (Baugh & Cable 2002). The historical development of English shows us that the geographic range of a language is greatly influenced by the scale of migration and by how the migration happens. I would like to explain how this, too, happened to Mandarin Chinese.

Standard Mandarin today is based on the Northern Mandarin dialect. The area around the Huanghe River or the Yellow River is considered to be the main spring of early Han Chinese civilisation. Thus it is easy to understand the first two varieties – Northern and central plains dialect. Most of the places involved are near the Yellow River except Xinjiang and Manchuria. Rather than explain each area in detail, I would choose to talk about Lower Yangzi Mandarin and South-western Mandarin since the reason behind them, is the same – large scale migration from the North in history.

The Lower Yangzi Mandarin dialect covers Nanjing, most of Jiangsu province, north of Yangzi, central Anhui province and parts of Hubei. This area was occupied by the former kingdoms of Wu, Chu, and Yue in the Spring Autumn and Warring State Period. It is hard to know what speech was like there more than 2000 years ago. But one thing for sure was that they didn't speak Mandarin at that time. When did they probably start to speak Mandarin? If we look at the history, we would get some clues. Chappell (2004) mentions that between the Eastern Han (25-220) and the Sui dynasties (581- 618) large numbers of people move south because of war. This was particularly important after the fall of the Jin capital, Luoyang, in 311 which saw the nobility flee south to re-establish their capital in Jinling (present-day Nanjing) in 317. And Sun (1996) claims, too, that in the 10th century, northern China was troubled by years of civil war. In contrast, life in southern China was surprisingly still peaceful and free from the turmoil of wars in the north. Li (2002) also states that millions of people moved southward during the catastrophe in the Year of Jingkang (1127), when the Kin army marched south, captured the eastern capital of the Song Dynasty and took both the emperor Qinzong and his father Huizong prisoner. At the end of the Northern Song dynasty (966-1127) when the ruling class moved south again, re-establish its capital in Hangzhou, not far from Nanjing. We could assume that Lower Yangzi area became Mandarin speaking area was a natural result of the migration from the north especially if we bear in mind that Nanjing used to be the capital for six dynasties in China. This is a very important factor if we consider the table of the geographic range. Many cities within it used to be the capitals of powerful kingdoms or the whole country.

The Southwestern Mandarin witnesses even bigger migration from North and maybe from all over the country in its history. The migration to this area mainly happened in Ming, Qing dynasties. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) migrated people from Hubei, Hunan, Anhui and Jiangxi to Sichuan. According to Li (2002) at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), preferential policies were made by Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong to encourage people to migrate to Sichuan Province. By 1776, immigrants to Sichuan and their descendants reached 6 million, accounting for more than 60 percent of the province's population. They

- I have look aspect marker (experiential)
I have seen / watched/ read (it)
- c. wo kan guo
I look aspect marker (experiential)
I have seen/ watched/ read (it).

Sentence 1c is standard Mandarin in Mainland, and 1a is Taiwan Mandarin. In standard Mandarin, you do not put ‘you’ 有(to have) precede a verb especially when it followed by ‘guo’ (experiential aspect marker) unless it is a negative sentence like 2c. Instead ‘you’ in standard Mandarin is put before a noun phrase in statement. For example:

2. a. wo you chi de.
I have eat nominalizer (I have something to eat)
- b. wo you henduo qian.
I have many mony (I have lots of money)
- c. wo meiyou chi guo.
I not have eat guo (I have not eaten (it before))

In sentence 2a, Chi de is a noun phrase because of nominalizer ‘de’. According to Li & Thompson(1989:575) In (standard) Mandarin, nominalization involves placing the particle de after a verb, a verb phrase or a sentence. So chi de in 2a is like the noun phrase ‘henduo qian’ in 2b. So if standard Mandarin does not place ‘you’ (to have) before a verb in statement sentence, why Taiwan Mandarin does so? Sentence 1b is the answer. Sentence 1b is Min. The Min speakers just follow the same sentence structure of their own dialect and then again adapted the pronunciation of Mandarin. That was why Taiwan Mandarin have lots of ‘wo you verb guo something’ in statement while standard Mandarin might think it is not acceptable to say so.

Besides Min, we can also find influence of Japanese in Taiwan Mandarin especially some vocabularies. For example: ‘bian dang’ (lunch container) and ‘wulong mian’ (wulong noodle) ‘Kabang’ (bag) ‘yijibang’ (very good) are from the pronunciation of Japanese. There are also some other interesting examples in standard Mandarin which Taiwanese find amusing. In mainland China, it used to be very common until early 1990s that people call each other ‘tongzhi’ (comrade); Couples introduce their spouse to others saying ‘zhe shi wo de airen’ (This is my love person = This is my wife/husband) while in Taiwan ‘tongzhi’ means ‘gay’ and ‘airen’ is ‘lover’. No wonder a pop singer in Taiwan especially wrote a song in 1990s named ‘airen tongzhi’ after his first visit to Mainland China.

3. CONCLUSION

Mandarin Chinese, like many other languages in the world, has changed and is undergoing change for many reasons. Migration and language contact between the new comers and local people are two of them. They played a great role in the geographic range and even the change of grammar of the language. In Mainland China today, even bigger migration from rural areas to urban areas is happening because farmers are no longer fastened to the land as they were

before. Thus in traditionally Cantonese speaking area like Guangzhou and Shenzhen; Wu speaking area like big Shanghai, lots of people there probably are speaking some new varieties of Mandarin. In addition, if “Chinese are estimated to be living in over 136 different countries, making it perhaps the most widespread ethnic group in the world” (Ang 2001), and if these “Overseas Chinese” speak Mandarin and it is very likely that they do, it is worth considering too, what role this international migration is playing on the new geographic range of Mandarin Chinese and its change in the future.

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