

DIALECTOLOGY

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SECOND EDITION



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1

Dialect and language

Dialectology, obviously, is the study of dialect and dialects. But what exactly is a dialect? In common usage, of course, a dialect is a substandard, low-status, often rustic form of language, generally associated with the peasantry, the working class, or other groups lacking in prestige. **dialect** is also a term which is often applied to forms of language, particularly those spoken in more isolated parts of the world, which have no written form. And dialects are also often regarded as some kind of (often erroneous) deviation from a norm – as aberrations of a correct or standard form of language.

In this book we shall not be adopting any of these points of view. We will, on the contrary, accept the notion that all speakers are speakers of at least one dialect – that standard English, for example, is just as much a dialect as any other form of English – and that it does not make any kind of sense to suppose that any one dialect is in any way linguistically superior to any other.

1.1 Mutual intelligibility

It is very often useful to regard dialects as **dialects of a language**. Dialects, that is, can be regarded as subdivisions of a particular language. In this way we may talk of the Parisian dialect of French, the Lancashire dialect of English, the Bavarian dialect of German, and so on.

This distinction, however, presents us with a number of difficulties. In particular, we are faced with the problem of how we can distinguish between a **language** and a **dialect**, and the related problem of how we can decide what a language is. One way of looking at this has often been to say that ‘a language is a collection of mutually intelligible dialects’. This definition has the benefit of characterising dialects as subparts of a language and of providing a criterion for distinguishing between one language and another.

This characterisation of ‘language’ and ‘dialect’, however, is not entirely successful, and it is relatively simple to think of two types of apparent counterexample. If we consider, first, the Scandinavian languages, we observe that Norwegian, Swedish and Danish are usually considered to be different languages. Unfortunately for our

definition, though, they are mutually intelligible. Speakers of these three languages can readily understand and communicate with one another. Secondly, while we would normally consider German to be a single language, there are some types of German which are not intelligible to speakers of other types. Our definition, therefore, would have it that Danish is less than a language, while German is more than a language.

There are also other difficulties with the criterion of mutual intelligibility. The main problem is that it is a criterion which admits of degrees of more or less. While it is true, for example, that many Swedes can very readily understand many Norwegians, it is also clear that they often do not understand them so well as they do other Swedes. For this reason, inter-Scandinavian mutual intelligibility can be less than perfect, and allowances do have to be made: speakers may speak more slowly, and omit certain words and pronunciations that they suspect may cause difficulties.

Mutual intelligibility may also not be equal in both directions. It is often said, for instance, that Danes understand Norwegians better than Norwegians understand Danes. (If this is true it may be because, as Scandinavians sometimes say, ‘Norwegian is pronounced like Danish is spelt’, while Danish pronunciation bears a rather more complex relationship to its own orthography. It may be due, alternatively or additionally, to more specifically linguistic factors.) Mutual intelligibility will also depend, it appears, on other factors such as listeners’ degree of exposure to the other language, their degree of education and, interestingly enough, their willingness to understand. People, it seems, sometimes do not understand because, at some level of consciousness, they do not want to. A study carried out in Africa, for example, demonstrated that, while one ethnic group A claimed to be able to understand the language of another ethnic group B, ethnic group B claimed *not* to be able to understand language A. It then emerged that group A, a larger and more powerful group, wanted to incorporate group B’s territory into their own on the grounds that they were really the same people and spoke the same language. Clearly, group B’s failure to comprehend group A’s language was part of their resistance to this attempted takeover.

1.2 Language, dialect and accent

It seems, then, that while the criterion of mutual intelligibility may have some relevance, it is not especially useful in helping us to decide what is and is not a language. In fact, our discussion of the Scandinavian languages and German suggests that (unless we want to change radically our everyday assumptions about what a language is) we have to recognise that, paradoxically enough, a ‘language’ is not a particularly linguistic notion at all. Linguistic features obviously come into it, but it is clear that we consider Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and German to be single languages for reasons that are as much political, geographical, historical, sociological and cultural as linguistic. It is of course relevant that all three Scandinavian languages have distinct, codified, standardised forms, with their own orthographies, grammar

books, and literatures; that they correspond to three separate nation states; and that their speakers consider that they speak different languages.

The term ‘language’, then, if from a linguistic point of view a relatively nontechnical term. If therefore we wish to be more rigorous in our use of descriptive labels we have to employ other terminology. One term we shall be using in this book is **variety**. We shall use ‘variety’ as a neutral term to apply to any particular kind of language which we wish, for some purpose, to consider as a single entity. The term will be used in an ad hoc manner in order to be as specific as we wish for a particular purpose. We can, for example, refer to the variety ‘Yorkshire English’, but we can equally well refer to ‘Leeds English’ as a variety, or ‘middle-class Leeds English’ – and so on. More particular terms will be **accent** and **dialect**. ‘Accent’ refers to the way in which a speaker pronounces, and therefore refers to a variety which is phonetically and/or phonologically different from other varieties. ‘Dialect’, on the other hand, refers to varieties which are grammatically (and perhaps lexically) as well as phonologically different from other varieties. If two speakers say, respectively, *I done it last night* and *I did it last night*, we can say that they are speaking different dialects.

The labels ‘dialect’ and ‘accent’, too, are used by linguists in an essentially ad hoc manner. This may be rather surprising to many people, since we are used to talking of accents and dialects as if they were well-defined, separate entities: ‘a southern accent’, ‘the Somerset dialect’. Usually, however, this is actually not the case. Dialects and accents frequently merge into one another without any discrete break.

1.3 Geographical dialect continua

There are many parts of the world where, if we examine dialects spoken by people in rural areas, we find the following type of situation. If we travel from village to village, in a particular direction, we notice linguistic differences which distinguish one village from another. Sometimes these differences will be larger, sometimes smaller, but they will be **cumulative**. The further we get from our starting point, the larger the differences will become. The effect of this may therefore be, if the distance involved is large enough, that (if we arrange villages along our route in geographical order) while speakers from village A understand people from village B very well and those from village F quite well, they may understand village M speech only with considerable difficulty, and that of village Z not at all. Villagers from M, on the other hand, will probably understand village F speech quite well, and villagers from A and Z only with difficulty. In other words, dialects on the outer edges of the geographical area may not be mutually intelligible, but they will be linked by a chain of mutual intelligibility. At no point is there a complete break such that geographically adjacent dialects are not mutually intelligible, but the cumulative effect of the linguistic differences will be such that the greater the geographical separation, the greater the difficulty of comprehension.



Map 1-1. European dialect continua

This type of situation is known as a **geographical dialect continuum**. There are many such continua. In Europe, for example, the standard varieties of French, Italian, Catalan, Spanish and Portuguese are not really mutually intelligible. The rural dialects of these languages, however, form part of the West Romance dialect continuum which stretches from the coast of Portugal to the centre of Belgium (with speakers immediately on either side of the Portuguese–Spanish border, for instance, having no problems in understanding each other) and from there to the south of Italy, as shown in Map 1-1. Other European dialect continua include the West Germanic continuum, which includes all dialects of what are normally referred to as German, Dutch and Flemish (varieties spoken in Vienna and Ostend are not mutually intelligible, but they are linked by a chain of mutual intelligibility); the Scandinavian dialect continuum, comprising dialects of Norwegian, Swedish and Danish; the North Slavic dialect continuum, including Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech and Slovak; and the South Slavic continuum, which includes Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian and Bulgarian.

The notion of the dialect continuum is perhaps a little difficult to grasp because, as has already been noted, we are used to thinking of linguistic varieties as discrete entities,

but the fact that such continua exist stresses the legitimacy of using labels for varieties in an ad hoc manner. Given that we have dialect continua, then the way we divide up and label particular bits of a continuum may often be, from a purely linguistic point of view, arbitrary. Note the following forms from the Scandinavian dialect continuum:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|---------|------|--------------------|----------------|------------|
| (1) | /hem:a | hɑr | ja intə sɔ me:d | sɔm et gam:alt | ɡausabain/ |
| (2) | /hem:a | hɑr | ja intə sɔ myk:tət | sɔm et gam:alt | ɡɔ:sbe:n/ |
| (3) | /jem:ə | hɑr | jæ ik:tə sɔ my:tə | sɔm et gam:alt | ɡɔ:səbe:n/ |
| (4) | /heimə | hɑr | eg iç:tə sɔ myç:tə | sɔm et gam:alt | ɡɔ:səbein/ |
| | At home | have | I not so much | as an old | goose-leg |

Some of these forms we label ‘Swedish’ and some ‘Norwegian’. As it happens, (1) and (2) are southern and central Swedish respectively, (3) and (4) eastern and western Norwegian respectively. But there seems to be no particular linguistic reason for making this distinction, or for making it where we do. The motivation is mainly that we have a linguistically arbitrary but politically and culturally relevant dividing line in the form of the national frontier between Sweden and Norway.

In some cases, where national frontiers are less well established, dialect continua can cause political difficulties – precisely because people are used to thinking in terms of discrete categories rather than in ad hoc or continuum-type terms. The South Slavic dialect continuum, as we have seen, incorporates the standard languages, Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian and Bulgarian. This description, however, conceals a number of problems to do with autonomy and heteronomy. Until recently, for example, Serbian and Croatian were thought of in Yugoslavia as a single language. Since the break-up of that country, however, many politicians have wanted to stress their separateness, while the government of Bosnia has argued that Bosnian constitutes a third language distinct from the other two. Similarly, Bulgarian politicians often argue that Macedonian is simply a dialect of Bulgarian – which is really a way of saying, of course, that they feel Macedonia ought to be part of Bulgaria. From a purely linguistic point of view, however, such arguments are not resolvable, since dialect continua admit of more-or-less but not either-or judgements.

1.4 Social dialect continua

Dialect continua can also be social rather than geographical, and continua of this type can also pose problems. A good example of this is provided by Jamaica. The linguistic history of Jamaica, as of many other areas of the Caribbean, is very complex. One (simplified) interpretation of what happened is that at one time the situation was such that those at the top of the social scale, the British, spoke English, while those at the bottom of the social scale, the African slaves, spoke Jamaican Creole. This was a language historically related to English but very different from it, and in its earlier stages probably was not too unlike modern Sranan (another English-based

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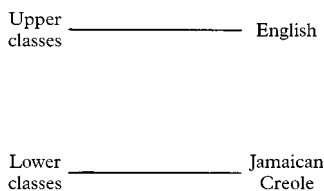


Fig. 1-1. The initial linguistic situation in Jamaica

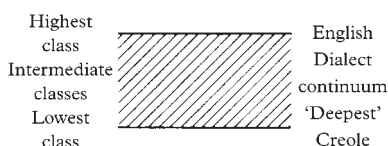


Fig. 1-2. The situation after contact between English and Creole speakers

Creole spoken in Surinam). The following extract from a poem in Sranan demonstrates that it is a language clearly related to English (most words appear to be derived from English) but nevertheless distinct from it and not mutually intelligible with it:

mi go – m’e kon,	I’ve gone – I come,
sootwatra bradi,	the sea is wide.
tak wan mofo,	Say the words,
ala mi mati,	you all my friends,
tak wan mofo,	say the words.
m’go,	I’ve gone,
m’e kon . . .	I come . . .

The initial linguistic situation in Jamaica, therefore, can be diagrammatically represented as in Fig. 1-1. Over the centuries, however, English, the international and prestigious language of the upper social strata, exerted a considerable influence on Jamaican Creole. (Jamaican Creole was recognised as being similar to English, and was therefore often (erroneously) regarded, because of the social situation, as an inferior or debased form of it.) The result is the situation shown in Fig. 1-2. Two things have happened. First, the ‘deepest’ Creole is now a good deal closer to English than it was (and than Sranan is). Secondly, the gap between English and Jamaican Creole has been filled in. The result is that, while people at the top of the social scale speak something which is clearly English, and those at the bottom speak something which clearly is not, those in between speak something in between. The range of varieties from ‘pure’ English to ‘deepest’ Creole forms the social dialect continuum. Most speakers command quite a wide range of the continuum and ‘slide’ up and down it depending on stylistic context. The following examples from different points on West Indian dialect continua illustrate the nature of the phenomenon:

<i>It’s my book</i>	<i>I didn’t get any</i>	<i>Do you want to cut it?</i>
its mai buk	ai didnt get eni	du ju wɔnt tu kʷt it
iz mai buk	ai didn get non	du ju wɑ:n tu kot it
iz mi buk	a din get non	ju wɑ:n kot it
a mi buk dat	a in get non	iz kot ju wɑ:n kot it
a fi mi buk dat	mi na bin get non	a kot ju wɑ:n fu kot it

The problem with the Jamaican social dialect continuum is that, while any division of it into two parts would be linguistically as arbitrary as the division of the northern part of the Scandinavian continuum into Norwegian and Swedish, there is no social equivalent of the political geographical dividing line between Norway and Sweden. There is no well-motivated reason for saying, of some point on the continuum, that 'English stops here' or 'Jamaican Creole starts here'. The result is that, whether in Jamaica or in, say, Britain, Jamaicans are considered to speak English. In fact, some Jamaicans do speak English, some do not, and some speak a variety or varieties about which it is not really possible to adjudicate. Clearly, the varieties spoken by most Jamaicans are not foreign to, say, British English speakers in the same way that French is, but they do constitute in many cases a *semi*-foreign language. Again this is a difficult notion for many people to grasp, since we are used to thinking of languages as being well-defined and clearly separated entities: either it is English or it is not. The facts, however, are often somewhat different. The most obvious difficulty to arise out of the Jamaican situation (and that in many other parts of the West Indies) is educational. West Indian children are considered to be speakers of English, and this is therefore the language which they are taught to read and write in and are examined in. Educationists have only recently come to begin to realise, however, that the relative educational failure of certain West Indian children may be due to a failure by educational authorities to recognise this semi-foreign language problem for what it is.

1.5 **Autonomy and heteronomy**

A useful concept in looking at the relationship between the notions of a 'language' and 'dialect continuum' is the concept of heteronomy. Heteronomy is simply the opposite of autonomy, and thus refers to dependence rather than independence. We say, for example, that certain varieties on the West Germanic dialect continuum are dialects of Dutch while others are dialects of German because of the relationship these dialects bear to the respective standard languages. The Dutch dialects are heteronomous with respect to standard Dutch, and the German dialects to standard German. This means, simply, that speakers of the Dutch dialects consider that they are speaking Dutch, that they read and write in Dutch, that any standardising changes in their dialects will be towards Dutch, and that they in general look to Dutch as the standard language which naturally corresponds to their vernacular varieties. Fig. 1-3 is an attempt to represent this diagrammatically by showing how the superposed autonomous varieties, standard Dutch and German, have been imposed over the dialect continuum.

Since heteronomy and autonomy are the result of political and cultural rather than purely linguistic factors, they are subject to change. A useful example of this is provided by the history of what is now southern Sweden. Until 1658 this area was part of Denmark (see Map 1-2), and the dialects spoken on that part of the Scandinavian

Dialect and language

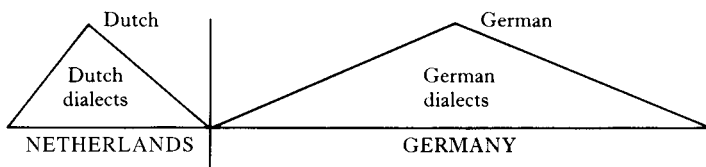
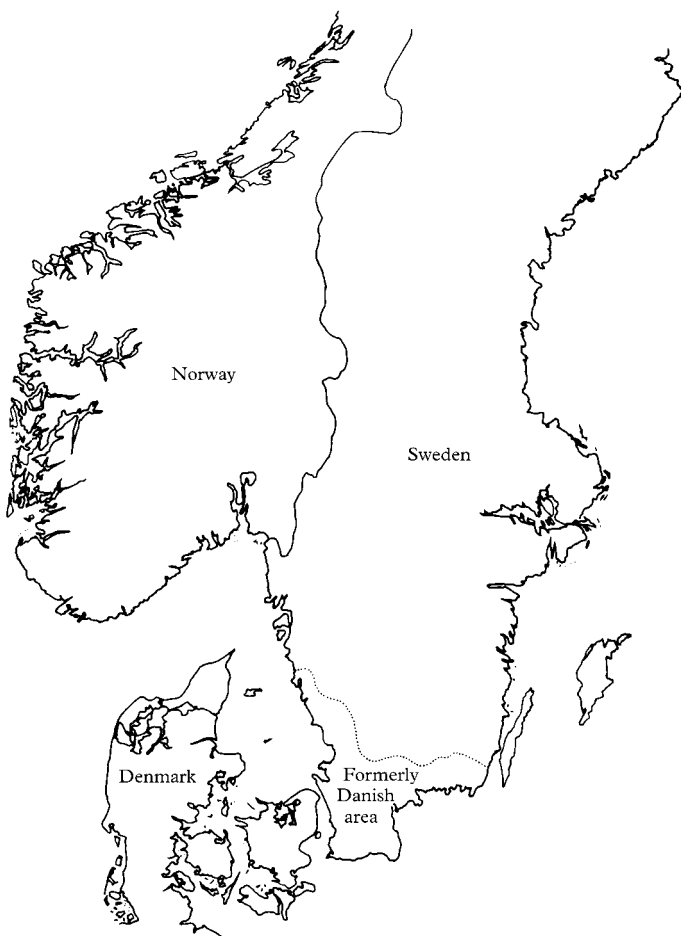


Fig. 1-3. West Germanic dialect continuum



Map 1-2. Sweden and Denmark, showing the southern region of Sweden which was formerly Danish territory

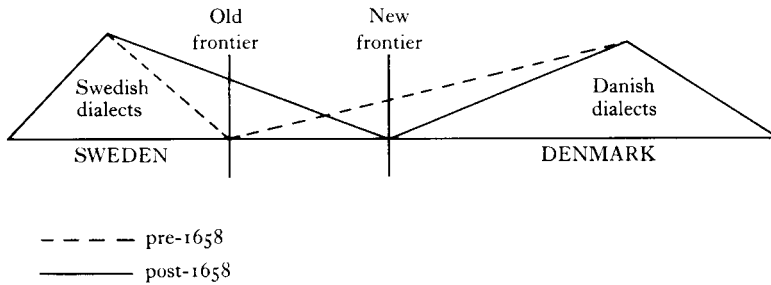


Fig. 1-4. Scandinavian dialect continuum

dialect continuum were considered to be dialects of Danish. As the result of war and conquest, however, the territory became part of Sweden, and it is reported that it was a matter of only forty years or so before those same dialects were, by general consent as it were, dialects of Swedish. The dialects themselves, of course, had not changed at all linguistically. But they had become heteronomous with respect to standard Swedish rather than Danish (see Fig. 1-4).

We can now, therefore, expand a little on our earlier discussion of the term 'language'. Normally, it seems, we employ this term for a variety which is autonomous together with all those varieties which are dependent (heteronomous) upon it. And just as the direction of heteronomy can change (e.g., Danish to Swedish), so formerly heteronomous varieties can achieve autonomy, often as the result of political developments, and 'new' languages can develop. (The linguistic forms will not be new, of course, simply their characterisation as forming an independent language.) Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, for instance, the standard language used in Norway was actually Danish, and it was only with the re-emergence of Norway as an independent nation that a distinct, autonomous standard Norwegian was developed. Similarly, what we now call Afrikaans became regarded as an independent language (and acquired a name, and an orthography and standardised grammar of its own) only in the 1920s. Prior to that it had been regarded as a form of Dutch.

In other cases, political separation may lead not to autonomy but to semi-autonomy (as in the case of Swiss German) or to a kind of double or shared autonomy. North American English, for example, used to look to British English as its norm, but now the autonomous standard English variety comes in a number of different forms, with British, American and Canadian English all being regarded as equally legitimate.

The same cannot be said of Canadian French, which still looks to European French as the norm (with the bizarre result that English-speaking Canadians are often still taught European French rather than Canadian French – rather as if Mexican Americans were taught British rather than American English). And Jamaican Creole is still to a very considerable extent heteronomous with respect to standard English. It has been

said that 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy'. There is considerable truth in this claim, which stresses the political factors that lie behind linguistic autonomy. Nevertheless, the Jamaican situation shows that it is not the whole truth. Perhaps a time will come when Jamaican Creole will achieve complete autonomy, like Norwegian, or shared autonomy, like American English. Certainly there are educational grounds for suggesting that such a development in Jamaica would be desirable.

It is also possible for autonomy to be lost, and for formerly independent varieties to become heteronomous with respect to other varieties. This is what has happened to those varieties of the English dialect continuum spoken in Scotland. Scots was formerly an autonomous variety, but has been regarded for most purposes as a variety of English for the last two hundred years or so. Movements are currently afoot, however, linked to the rise of Scottish nationalism, for the reassertion of Scottish English/Scots as a linguistic variety in its own right, and it is possible that some form of Scots will achieve at least semi-autonomy at some future date.

1.6 Discreteness and continuity

We shall be looking frequently at dialect continua in the rest of this book, and observing that traditional work in dialectology has not always been very successful in handling linguistic phenomena such as variability, gradience and fuzziness that result from the fact that such continua exist. We shall, it is true, be using labels for linguistic varieties that may suggest that we regard them as discrete entities. It will be as well, nevertheless, to bear in mind that this will in most cases be simply an ad hoc device and that the use of labels such as 'language', 'dialect' and 'variety' does not imply that continua are not involved.

Further information

A useful discussion of the problem of 'language' and 'dialect' can be found in Hockett 1958: chapter 38. The problem of mutual intelligibility in Scandinavia is interestingly dealt with in Haugen 1966b. The African intelligibility study referred to is Wolff 1959. Further discussion on dialect, accent and speech can be found in Trudgill 1955. For a more theoretical discussion of dialectologists' approaches to variability, gradience and fuzziness, see Chambers 1993. Information on Scandinavian dialects is provided by Walshe 1965. Information on creoles, including Jamaican Creole and Sranan, can be found in Todd 1974 and in Hymes 1971, from which the Caribbean examples in this chapter are taken, as well as in Mühlhäusler 1986; Romaine 1988; and Holm 1988. Haugen's writings are also informative on the switch of some dialects from Danish to Swedish and on the rise of Norwegian; see, respectively, Haugen 1968 and 1966a. On the achievement of autonomy by Afrikaans, see Combrink 1978.