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Language, Dialect, and Accent

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.

a. 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.

b. 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 non-technical 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.

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