

How is a Language Formed?

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1. In 广西 Guangxi, China, near the Vietnam border, live an ethnic minority group called 京 Jing, who speak a variety of Vietnamese that the Chinese call 京语 Jing-yu (Jing language). The comparison of Jing-yu with Middle Vietnamese and modern dialects of Vietnamese gives us more or less a good idea about the formation of a new language.

Until now there have not been complete criteria proposed for differentiating language and dialect. The word 'language' used here may be understood as 'language' or 'dialect', that is, some sort of linguistic system.

2. The population of the Jing

The population of Jing consists of 10,000 people. Most of them are fishermen living on three islands, 巫头 Wutou (Vu Đầu), 万尾 Wanwei (Vạn Vi), and 山心 Shanxin (Sơn Tâm). As well, there are several other villages in 江平镇 Jiangping Zhen (Giang Bình Trấn) District in Guangxi Province. The history of the Vạn Vi village written in Chinese and also in "chữ nôm" (Chinese characters with added diacritics formerly used to record Vietnamese) shows us that their ancestors were fishermen from the island of Đồ Sơn (Vietnam) near the city of Hải Phòng. They left their homeland in 1511 to live on these islands, where they have long resided fairly isolated by the ocean from their origins. Later, they formed an autonomous commune at 东兴 Dongxing (Đông Hưng) (1).

In recent years the percentage of Chinese has increased on the island of Vạn Vi (the largest of the islands), as shown in the following table. There is another minority group, the Zhuang (of the Zhuang-Dong group), in several nearby villages, but (as is evident in the chart below) with only a small number of speakers (2).

Village Name	Total Pop	Jing		Chinese		Zhuang	
		Pop.	%	Pop.	%	Pop.	%
Sơn Tâm / Shanxin	1146	1070	93.37	76	6.63		
Vu Đầu / Wutou	1258	960	76.31	298	23.69		
Vạn Vi / Wanwei	3043	1123	36.90	1840	60.47	80	2.63
Đàm Cát / Tanje	952	680	71.43	272	28.57		
Hồng Khâm / Hongkan	520	415	79.81	105	20.19		
Hồng Vong / Hongwang	413	281	68.04	132	31.96		
Trúc Sơn / Zhushan	2671	187	7.00	2360	88.06	124	4.64
TOTAL	10003	4716	47.15	5083	50.81	204	2.04

3. Despite the early emigration of the Jing to China—the beginning of the 16th century, their language does not demonstrate the old written initials of Alexandre de Rhodes' dictionary recorded more than one hundred-fifty years later in 1651 (3). The palatalized fricatives β and δ and the consonant clusters bl , tl , ml , present then can still be heard today in several dialects of Central Vietnam (hereafter CD) in Quang Binh Province. Jing today, in fact, has the following consonants:

Initial Consonants

p	ph	b	m		f	v
t	th	d	n	l	ʈ	
ts	tsh				s	
			ɲ			j
k	kh		ŋ		ɣ	
ʔ					h	

4. The system of initial consonants in Jing-yu, except for p, ph, tsh, ʈ, — which are only found in words borrowed from the Guangxi dialect of Chinese — resembles the initial consonant systems found in dialects of Vietnamese of the north (hereafter ND). Note that kh varies with x in Vietnamese phonetics.

The three different consonants written 'r', 'd', 'gi' in A. de Rhodes' dictionary are pronounced [j], whereas in ND they are pronounced [z]. We know, though, that [z] has replaced [j] recently, as initial [j] can still be heard in the speech of elderly residents of Hanoi. On the other hand, [j] can be found in CD and throughout the dialects of the south (hereafter SD).

Jing-yu has [t] rather than [ʈ] ('tr') and [th] rather than [ʂ] ('s'), for example:

ten [trên] 'on top',	tɔŋ [trong] 'inside'	tuŋ [trung] 'egg'
tha:u [sao] 'star'	thuaŋ [sương]	thoŋ [sông] 'river'

which is a distinctive feature of the coastal dialects in the northern and central areas of Vietnam.

5. Medial w

In VM as in ND and CD, medial w may accompany all of the initials.

In A. de Rhodes' dictionary, medial w is written "u", "ü" and "ö". For example, *xuân* 'spring', *thuyền* 'sampan', *hoa* 'flower'

But in SD, medial w has disappeared in two ways:

1. Initial velars and glottals are lost preceding w, for example: *hoa* [wa] 'flower', *quí* [wi] 'precious', *ngoài* [wai] 'outside', *oan* [wan] 'unjust', *khuya* [fie] 'midnight'

2. Medial w is lost following the other initials, for example: *thuyền* [thiɛŋ] 'sampan', *xuân* [suɛŋ] 'spring'

In Jing-yu, medial w only exists after the velar and glottal initials: kw-, ɲw-, khw-, ʔw-, hw-, and disappears after all other initials, (examples: *thiɛn* 'boat' sɛn 'spring') as in the SD.

6. Vowels

The Jing-yu system of vowels is the same as VM and modern Vietnamese, with 11 vowels (two long) and three diphthongs.

i	u		u
e	ə	ə:	o
ɛ	a	a:	ɔ
iə	uə		uə

7. Rhymes

The rhymes of Jing-yu are like those of CD, ND and SD.

The rhymes consisting of the vowels /u/, /o/ and /ɔ/ combined with /-ŋ/ and /-k/ with two possible pronunciations:

[-uŋ]	[-uk]	[-oŋ]	[-ok]	[-ɔŋ]	[-ɔk]	(with lips rounded)
[-uŋ]	[-ok]	[-əuŋ]	[-əuk]	[-auŋ]	[-auk]	(with lips closed)

In Vietnamese, the first variant is older than the second. The first is found in CD, the second is typical of both the ND and SD and had already been transcribed in de Rhodes' dictionary:

The diffusion of final -n replacing -ŋ and the -t replacing -c in CD (in Quang Tri, Quang Binh and Ha Tinh provinces) is also found in Jing-yu:

- a) 1 -dəu⁶ san⁴ (đậu xanh) 'green bean', (hà nh) 'onion' han².
 -nat⁷ (nách) 'armpit', khat⁷ (khách) 'visitor'
- 2 -kan⁵ (cắn) 'bite', an¹ (ăn) 'to eat'
 -bat⁷ (bắt) 'catch', mat⁷ (mắt) 'eye'
- b) 1 -kat⁷mən⁶ (cách mệnh) 'revolution', ko¹nət⁷ (con ếch) 'frog'
 2 -thən² (thần) 'genius', dət⁷ (đất) 'earth'
- c) 1 -min²məi³ (mình mẩy) 'body', thin²dəi¹ (sinh đôi) 'twin',
 -thit⁷ (thích) 'like'
- 2 -kit⁷ (cứt) 'excrement'

In SD, the finals -n and -t are pronounced as in examples a1, b1 and c1, but in examples a2, b2 and c2, the finals are not confused because they are changed to -ŋ and -k.

8. Tonal System

Except for the ru sheng (nhập thanh) or CVC syllables, there are five tones in Jing-yu, similar to the tonal system of SD, that is the tones 3 and 4 (hỏi and ngã) fuse into one tone.

Below are four examples of tone 3 in the Jing-yu

Tone 1	33	ja ¹ 'leave'
adjacent to the words in Vietnamese orthography.	Tone 2	22
		ja ² 'old'

hoi [hói] 'to ask', bai [bát] 'seven'	Tone 3	214	ja ³ 'false'
mui [múi] 'nose', lui [lôi] 'language'	Tone 5	45	ja ⁵ 'price'
	Tone 6	11	ja ⁶ ja ² 'stomach'

9. Phonetic Variation

In Vietnamese, phonetic variation is used in reduplication (từ láy): a phoneme of a syllable is changed according to harmony principles, for example:

Besides phonetic variation in lexical items, Jing-yu also has phonetic variation in the phrase because of the influence of final stops and nasals:

1. Final stops change initial h to an aspirated stop
 - dep⁸ hə:n¹ nɔ⁵ --- dep⁸ phə:n¹ nɔ⁵ 'nicer than her'
 - mot⁸ hə:ŋ² kəi¹ --- mot⁸ tha:ŋ² kəi¹ 'a line of trees'
 - kuk⁷ hwa⁴ --- kuk⁷ khwa¹ 'chrysanthemum'
2. Final nasals cause nasal assimilation in the following initial consonants:
 - həŋ¹ ʔa:u⁵ --- hɔŋ⁴ ʔa:u⁵ 'drying a coat'
 - an¹ ʔem¹ --- an¹ ɲem¹ 'elder and younger brothers'
 - len¹ ja⁵ --- len¹ ɲa⁵ 'increasing the price'

Conclusion:

The phonetic comparison of Jing-yu with Middle Vietnamese and the dialects of modern Vietnamese shows in itself a great similarity between Jing-yu and modern Vietnamese, and a great difference between Jing-yu and Middle Vietnamese as found in de Rhodes' dictionary (even though the date of the Jing emigration is more than a century and a half before the time of the dictionary).

These similarities and differences indicate certainly that Jing-yu derived from Middle Vietnamese, but also that it has developed over time since then in parallel with the Vietnamese of its homeland, while DeRhodes' dictionary fixes the state of the language at the time it was published.

Jing-yu is similar to Vietnamese in the following ways:

1. Initials are the same as ND initials, especially those of the coastal areas.
2. A medial disappears in certain phonetic environments, as occurs in SD.
3. The diffusion of certain rhymes is also found in CD.
4. The diffusion of tones is the same as in SD.

These characteristics common to both Jing-yu and the different dialects of modern Vietnamese show that the internal factors of the linguistic system play a decisive role in the development of a language.

The influence of Chinese and of Zhuang are more apparent in the vocabulary of Jing-yu than in its phonetic system.

Notes:

- (1) Han Zhaoming. *Minzu Zhishi Congshu*. (Knowledge Series on Ethnic Nationalities). Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe.
- (2) Ouyang Jueya, Cheng Fang, and Yu Cuirong (eds.). *Jingyu Jianzhi*. (Sketch of the Jing language.) Beijing: Minzu Chubanshe.
- (3) Rhodes, A. de. 1651. *Dictionarium Annamiticum - Lucitanum - Latinum*. Roma.