

On the Vitality of the Dapeng Dialect: a Cantonese-Hakka Mixed Language

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The Dapeng dialect is a newly documented and archived minor Chinese dialect spoken primarily in Shenzhen, Guangdong and Manhattan, New York (Chen 2016). It is spoken by 3,000 to 5,500 speakers in the Dapeng peninsula on the South China Sea coast. Among many dialects found in southern China, the Dapeng dialect is unique as it is a mixture of Hakka and Cantonese in all aspects: sound system, lexicon, and syntax.

Minor Chinese dialects are reported to have been losing their vitality due to the growing impact of more prestigious dialects or languages at both the regional (such as Standard Cantonese in Guangdong) and national levels (such as Putonghua in China). Given the overall similar linguistic ecology that the Dapeng dialect shares with those dialects, one would naturally wonder whether the Dapeng dialect is also losing its vitality and, if that is the case, at what pace is the vitality being lost? These questions are addressed in this study.

This study first reviews some of the most influential frameworks that have been proposed for language vitality assessment and demonstrates that the UNESCO Language Vitality and Endangerment (LVE) scale is the most suitable and most applicable one in the Chinese context. This model is then employed to the evaluation of the vitality of the Dapeng dialect, supported by evidence drawn from first-hand interviews, observations, and demographic data collected during fieldwork.

The results of assessment show that, despite the low scores of some of the factors in the UNESCO-LVE scale, which might suggest a low vitality, an overview of all factors clearly suggests an overall vigorous condition. More specifically, in spite of inadequate institutional support and less developed literature/orthographies, the majority of the factors all point to a positive, vital situation of local dialect use in the Dapeng community.

This condition makes Dapeng distinctive from many other minor Chinese dialects, which are usually reported in the literature as in danger. Through this assessment, this study shows that not all small dialects in China are severely endangered. One will have to rely on evaluative frameworks in order to have a comprehensive, systematic view of the vitality issue of a dialect, which could be heavily determined by the very specific sociolinguistic ecology in the local community.

(371 words)

Selected references:

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