

Compare the phenomena of dialect contact and language contact. How can we distinguish between them? What outcomes might be expected in each case?

1. Introduction

When speakers from different parts of a country or entirely different regions of the world come together and interact, their words begin to shift, blend, and evolve, raising the question: what happens when languages or dialects collide? Linguistic change resulting from interaction between speech communities is referred to as *contact*. Specifically, *language contact* occurs when speakers of different languages engage in communication, while *dialect contact* refers to interaction between speakers of different varieties of the same language. In sociolinguistics, both of these phenomena play a pivotal role in revealing how social interactions drive linguistic variation and change, and this often entails deeper socio-political and cultural dimensions.

The central objective of this paper is to distinguish between these two types of contact and explore the range of linguistic consequences that may arise in each context. As a starting point, section 2 briefly explores the distinction between language and dialect, as far they can be delineated, as this difference is significant for what is discussed thereafter. Section 3 discusses what constitutes dialect contact with various cross-linguistic examples. Section 4 mirrors section 3 but from the perspective of language contact. Although I unavoidably discuss some of the social implications of language and dialect contact in these two sections, section 5 summarises these and elaborates on this to further show how language contact intersects with identity, power, and cultural dynamics. Section 6 is the conclusion.

2. Distinguishing language and dialect

Before addressing the primary object of this paper, i.e., linguistic contact, I feel it necessary to first take a step back and clarify the distinction between the terms *language* and *dialect*. As will become evident to the reader, this is neither simple nor uncontroversial. In exploring this distinction, I draw from three primary lines of arguments commonly discussed in the literature: mutual intelligibility (section 2.2), linguistic distance (2.3), and socio-political

factors (2.4). Each of these dimensions bring us closer to distinguishing the boundary between the two terms, while simultaneously raising further questions and complications.

2.1 *The value of a distinction*

Given the reported difficulties and general disagreements surrounding the differentiation between *language* and *dialect*, one might reasonably question whether such a distinction is worth pursuing at all. Why attempt to draw a line that is, at best, ambiguous and, at worst, politically charged or arbitrary? Nevertheless, linguists argue that the distinction remains not only relevant but also practically necessary. As Wichmann (2019), building on the work of Korjavov (2017), contends, maintaining a distinction between languages and dialects serves a variety of important functions. These include “cataloguing languages, assigning ISO 639-3 codes, preparing maps of languages, planning revitalization efforts, or for doing statistics on language distributions” (p. 823). In other words, despite its conceptual challenges, the distinction has real-world implications across fields such as language documentation, policy-making, linguistic typology, and sociolinguistics. Without some working criteria, however provisional, for separating languages from dialects, efforts in these areas risk becoming inconsistent or ineffective. Thus, even a contested or fluid distinction is useful for both theoretical inquiry and applied linguistics.

2.2 *Mutual intelligibility*

One of the most common criteria for distinguishing between a language and a dialect is mutual intelligibility, that is, the degree to which speakers of one variety can understand speakers of another. The underlying assumption is that if two varieties are mutually unintelligible, they should be classified as distinct languages. Conversely, if there is a sufficient degree of mutual understanding, the varieties should be considered dialects of the same language.

Wichmann (2019) identifies a significant problem with this criterion, which concerns asymmetry of intelligibility. There are notable cases of languages where speakers of one language understand speakers of another language but this is not bidirectional. One such example is that of Czech and Slovak. Historically, Czech and Slovak were treated as two varieties of a single language, reflected in the disused name of the language, Czechoslovak,

during the existence of the state of Czechoslovakia. During this period, Czech was the dominant and more prestigious variety, being used in media and education. Specifically, Czech was taught in Slovak schools but the reverse was less common. As a result, Slovak speakers understood Czech more than Czech speakers could understand Slovak (Gooskens, 2007; Budovičová, 1999). The contemporary situation is that, according to Nábělková (2007), mutual intelligibility has decreased, especially among younger generations, since each language area gained independence from the other, likely due to less contact between the two speaker groups than was common pre-dissolution. The point is that such situations are influenced by socio-political factors rather than linguistic criteria or any inherent intelligibility (Wichmann, 2019), thus making the argument of mutual intelligibility problematic from a purely linguistic perspective. Moreover, intelligibility itself is shaped by social exposure and prestige. Speakers are more likely to understand varieties they encounter through media, education, or social dominance, making so-called “mutual” intelligibility a reflection of sociopolitical asymmetry rather than linguistic equivalence (Gooskens, 2007; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994).

2.3 *Linguistic distance*

An alternative is to measure linguistic distance between varieties, a statistical approach which is methodologically more objective than the more socio-political mutual intelligibility approach. Wichmann (2019) examines lexical data using the core metric of Normalized Levenshtein Distance (LDN), which calculates the average distance between words based on word lists from the ASJP (Automated Similarity Judgment Program). Each word pair is compared based on the number of insertions, deletions, or substitutions needed to transform one word into another, normalised by word length. By applying this metric across thousands of language varieties, the study identified a bimodal distribution of LDN values within genetically related language groups: one cluster representing dialects and another representing distinct languages. When plotted, these distances do not cluster around a single central value, but instead form two separate peaks: one peak representing shorter distances, typically found between dialects of the same language; the other peak representing longer distances, found between different languages within the same language family. The valley between the two peaks suggests a threshold between what can be

considered a dialect and what can be considered a language. The average LDN threshold of 0.51 is proposed as an objective criterion to distinguish dialects ($LDN < 0.51$) from languages ($LDN \geq 0.51$). Since this approach is data-driven, consistent across multiple language families, and avoids sociopolitical biases, it provides a scientifically grounded criterion for making a traditionally subjective distinction.

Yet, while such quantitative approaches offer consistency, they risk oversimplifying socially embedded boundaries. Language varieties often gain or lose status not through structural metrics but via ideological processes of differentiation (Irvine & Gal, 2000).

2.4 *Socio-political factors*

In my discussion of Czech and Slovak in section 2.2, I alluded to the fact that mutual intelligibility may be tied to socio-political factors. On this theme, there exist further complications in the distinguishing between language and dialect. One side of the issue involves individual varieties each being designated individual language status despite historically being considered one language or sharing significant linguistic similarities, especially grammatically, that they are completely mutually intelligible. A prime example is Serbo-Croatian, now recognised post-Yugoslavia, as Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, Montenegrin and Slovenian (Greenberg, 2004; Baily, 2010).

The opposite situation involves languages like Arabic and Chinese, which linguistically can be argued to be macro-languages: “[...] a cluster of closely related individual languages that are commonly understood by their users to be varieties of a single language, often for political or cultural reasons, despite linguistic differences that may prevent mutual intelligibility.” (Simons & Fennig, 2023, para. 3).

These complexities in distinguishing languages from dialects are crucial, as they directly affect how we interpret and classify instances of linguistic contact, the focus of the following sections.

3. Dialect contact: definitions and outcomes

In this section, I begin with a definition of *dialect contact*, followed by case studies to illustrate how dialect contact occurs in practice. There are several outcomes of dialect contact that are present in these instances, including *dialect levelling*, *accommodation* and *reallocation*.

Dialect contact is of interest in accounting for how language can change within a single linguistic system, and concerns interaction between speakers of different varieties (or dialects) of the same language, usually through habitual or regular communication. These interactions often lead to reciprocal influence on speech patterns (Trudgill, 1986) and can result in a "decrease in morphosyntactic variation" (Trousdale, 2010: 116). Kerswill (2003) suggests that dialect contact is most visible in urban areas or areas with high social mobility, where speakers from various dialectal backgrounds have the opportunity to frequently interact. Its effects can be seen across various linguistic domains, including vocabulary (Rizka & Zainuddin, 2016), grammar (Britain, 2001; 2009), and pronunciation (Lanwer Meyer et al., 2016; Schmidt, 2015).

3.1 *Dialect levelling and accommodation*

Two closely related outcomes of dialect contact are dialect levelling and linguistic accommodation. Dialect levelling is typically defined as "the reduction or attrition of marked variants; that is, variants which are specific to particular dialects" (Kerswill, 2003, p. 223). This process usually happens when speakers of different dialects interact with one another and begin to adopt and use more general and socially neutral linguistic features, which leads to a reduction of regional variation.

Linguistic accommodation, meanwhile, refers to "the process whereby speakers shift their speech styles toward or away from the speech of their interlocutors depending on whether they seek approval, enhanced communicative efficiency, or maintenance of distinctiveness" (Giles, Coupland, & Coupland, 1991, p. 7). This can involve changes in pronunciation, vocabulary or syntax, and is influenced by social factors such as solidarity, prestige, and power dynamics.

A convincing example of dialect levelling comes from de Jong's (1996) study of a number of Bedouin tribes in northwestern Sinai, Egypt. He found that Bedouins' prolonged contact with the non-nomadic community of the Nile Delta has resulted in the gradual erosion of Bedouin features. In addition, de Jong identified a countertrend, which he terms 'bedouinization', where speakers actively maintain or even heighten traditional Bedouin elements in resistance to the pressures of levelling. This dual resilience contrasts the primarily urban-focus of the literature on dialect contact, such as that highlighted by Kerswill (2003), by demonstrating that levelling and innovation can occur in rural and socially

marginalised communities. Consequently, this prompts discussion about how mobility, media consumption, and socio-economic structures shape language change in communities that have often been assumed to be isolated and linguistically conservative.

Another illustrative example comes from S'hiri's (2002) study of linguistic accommodation between speakers of Tunisian Arabic and speakers of Arabic from the Middle East. Her analysis indicates a distinct pattern of unilateral convergence by speakers of Tunisian Arabic, who adjust their speech to more closely align with Middle Eastern varieties. Accommodation in this instance is not simply a matter of attempting to improve mutual intelligibility, but draws attention to important socio-political dimensions, particularly the prestige associated with the cultural and political positioning of Middle Eastern (Sharqi) varieties of Arabic. S'hiri's study serves as an important reminder of the ways accommodation simply reinforces existing social relations, and in this case, represents a salient example of dialect contact being shaped by power relations.

3.2 *Reallocation*

Linguistic reallocation occurs when features from different dialects are preserved in a contact variety while taking on different social or stylistic functions (Britain, 2002). This concept is important in understanding dialect contact and koinéisation: the process by which a new, levelled dialect emerges as speakers of related dialects come into sustained contact and blend their linguistic features (Trudgill, 1986). Rather than being eliminated, certain linguistic variants are retained and reassigned new roles within the developing dialect, reflecting shifting social meanings and communicative purposes. However, this framing can sometimes gloss over the complexities of dialect contact, such as unequal power relations or social resistance that influence which variants are retained or reassigned (Woolard, 1998).

An example of linguistic reallocation is seen in the emergence of Multicultural London English (MLE), where features from multiple dialects (i.e., Caribbean English, Cockney, South Asian English, and various other dialects) are retained but assigned new social meanings (Chambers & Schilling, 2013; Kerswill & Williams, 2000). Rather than one dialect simply replacing another, MLE speakers selectively retain certain phonological, lexical, and syntactic features from multiple varieties, assigning them new social meanings associated with urban youth identity and multicultural solidarity; variants are not lost but re-functionalised in response to shifting social dynamics. It highlights how dialect contact can

result in innovative speech forms that reflect complex processes of identity construction and group affiliation. However, some scholars caution against over-romanticising urban hybrid varieties like MLE, as such speech styles often emerge within contexts of economic disadvantage and racialised social exclusion (Rampton, 2011). Linguistic innovation in such instances coexists with, and does not negate, marginalisation.

In summary, dialect contact involves complex interactions between speakers of related language varieties, resulting in phenomena such as dialect levelling, accommodation, and linguistic reallocation. These processes reflect not only linguistic changes but also underlying social dynamics, including power relations, negotiated identities, and resistance. Understanding these outcomes provides a basis for exploring *language* contact, which is the focus of the next section.

4. Language contact: definitions and outcomes

Unlike *dialect* contact, language contact concerns the interaction between speakers of different unintelligible *languages*, which often leads to the transfer of linguistic features across totally unrelated languages that come together in a single geographical space (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988).

Matras (2009) builds on earlier foundational work by framing language contact not just as a linguistic event but as a socially and cognitively embedded process. He emphasises that the communicative goals, discourse strategies, and processing capacities of individual speakers play a central role in shaping the outcomes of contact situations. In this view, language contact is deeply influenced by speaker agency, multilingual competence, and interactional norms in specific social contexts.

Crucially, Matras also stresses that contact does not automatically lead to structural change. Instead, outcomes depend on a range of factors including speaker intentions, patterns of use, and sociolinguistic environments. This perspective underscores the fluid, contingent nature of language contact, offering a contrast to more deterministic or structurally focused models of linguistic change.

Language contact can produce a wide range of outcomes, from *lexical borrowing* and *code-switching* to *structural convergence*, *language shift*, and the emergence of new linguistic varieties, such as *pidgins* and *creoles*. I address each of these outcomes in the

following sub-sections with case studies to illustrate how each manifests itself across different contact situations.

4.1 *Lexical borrowing*

Lexical borrowing refers to the process by which one language adopts words from another language as a result of language contact. This is one of the earliest and most visible effects of such contact and often serves to fill lexical gaps, mark prestige, or reflect cultural exchange (Haspelmath, 2009). In fact, lexical items are the most commonly borrowed elements in contact situations, as they can be integrated with relatively little structural disruption to the recipient language (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988).

When words are borrowed as a result of language contact, speakers often adapt these words to fit the phonotactics of their native language, especially if certain phonemes or sound combinations in the lexifier language (the language providing the new vocabulary) do not exist in the speakers' current phonological system. Alhaider (2025) investigates the phonological adaptations that occur when Arabic loanwords containing guttural consonants are integrated into English, and examines how native English speakers articulate these loanwords. The findings indicate that speakers often modify or omit guttural sounds to conform to English phonological constraints. This case study underscores the complexities involved in lexical borrowing, highlighting how phonological systems of the recipient language can significantly shape the integration of foreign lexical items.

Matras (2009), drawing on research by Swadesh (1952), provides an interesting insight into what types of words tend to be resistant to borrowing in language contact situations. These include "names of body-parts, close kin, body-related activities, pronouns, interrogatives, and basic concepts for nature and geography" (p. 166). Matras does, however, point out that this idea is based on an assumption and still requires empirical cross-linguistic evidence to verify the claim.

Although I do not elaborate here, in addition to lexical borrowing, grammatical, morphological and phonological borrowing are also common in language contact. For more on this, see chapter 8 of Matras (2009).

4.2 Code-switching

Code-switching refers to “the alternation of languages within a conversation” (Matras, 2009: 101). Matras contrasts this phenomenon with borrowing, noting that while borrowing results in a language “enhanc[ing its] vocabulary”, code-switching captures the “spontaneous language mixing in the conversation of bilinguals (p. 106). He offers a comprehensive schema reflecting the various dimensions of the continuum between code-switching and borrowing, which I reproduce in Figure 1:

Bilinguality bilingual speaker ↔ monolingual speaker
Composition elaborate utterance/phrase ↔ single lexical item
Functionality special conversational effect, stylistic choice ↔ default expression
Unique reference (specificity) lexical ↔ para-lexical
Operationality core vocabulary ↔ grammatical operations
Regularity single occurrence ↔ regular occurrence
Structural integration not integrated ↔ integrated
codeswitching ↔ borrowing

Figure 1: dimensions of the codeswitching-borrowing continuum (Matras, 2009: 111, Figure 5.1)

Prin (2021) offers an illustrative case study on occupational code-switching among Thai waiters in a UK restaurant. The study highlights how code-switching decisions are influenced by the language used to initiate the interaction, the social roles of participants, and the setting. It was found that whereas English was predominantly used for formal, customer-facing exchanges, Thai was preferred for informal interactions with colleagues. Crucially, the waiters often continued to use the language initiated by the first speaker, even after the customer had left the conversation reflecting dynamic, context-sensitive language use that aligns with both professional expectations and in-group social identity. These findings highlight how code-switching can be employed not only as a communicative resource in multilingual contexts, but also to perform relational and identity-marking functions as well.

4.3 *Structural convergence*

Structural convergence is the process by which languages, as a result of sustained contact begin to resemble one another in terms of their grammatical structures, such as in word order, case marking, or tense-aspect-mood systems. This phenomenon typically occurs in long-term bilingual or multilingual contexts where prolonged interaction leads speakers to adopt structural features from one language into another, without necessarily borrowing vocabulary (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988). Similarly, Heine and Kuteva (2005) discuss structural convergence in terms of grammatical replication, whereby speakers imitate the syntactic or morphological patterns of a contact language in their own.

Despite its usefulness, the concept of structural convergence requires cautious application, as not all observed similarities can be conclusively attributed to contact. The concept of structural convergence has been critiqued for potentially overstating the influence of contact, particularly in cases where shared structures may instead result from internal language change or common typological tendencies. Critics argue that not all structural similarities should be attributed to contact, as convergent features might emerge independently in unrelated languages (Campbell, 2006). Moreover, defining clear boundaries between contact-induced change and internal developments can be methodologically challenging, especially in cases where historical data is limited or ambiguous. Therefore, while structural convergence remains a useful explanatory concept, it should be applied cautiously and in conjunction with other linguistic evidence. Indeed, some researchers warn that the contact hypothesis is sometimes applied prematurely, with insufficient historical or social evidence, leading to circular reasoning in areal linguistics (Campbell, 2006). Careful distinction must be made between genuine convergence and typological similarity.

4.4 *Language shift*

Language shift refers to the process by which one language gradually displaces another within a speech community over a period time, typically resulting in reduced proficiency and usage of the original language across successive generations. This process is driven by factors such as intermarriage, migration, urbanisation, and education (Fishman, 1991; Holmes, 2013). A striking consequence of language shift is language endangerment or, in

more serious cases, language death, especially when the less dominant language is no longer transmitted to younger generations.

Peters' (2013) study of Southern Khams Tibetan spoken in Zhongdian presents a clear example of language shift within a minority speech community. Though part of the wider Tibetan family, Zhongdian Tibetan faces internal and external pressures that have critically endangered its use. There are two explanations for this: externally, Mandarin is supplanting the use of Southern Khams Tibetan, which is driven by urbanisation, tourism, and state education policies; internally, Southern Khams varieties are considered low-prestige in comparison to Literary Tibetan and other standardised Tibetan varieties, which are more institutionally supported. As a consequence, inter-generational transmission has all but collapsed in Zhongdian's urban centre, with children no longer acquiring the language at home. The study found that even older generations had only partial fluency, and the language is used mostly symbolically. Despite this, rural areas show stronger maintenance of the language, albeit threatened by boarding schools and increasing integration with urban life. While documentation and revitalisation efforts show promise, significant socio-political and community engagement is needed to reverse the shift and preserve Zhongdian Tibetan. However, revitalisation initiatives often privilege standardised or elite forms of the language, which may marginalise grassroots varieties and speakers, particularly in rural or lower-income communities (Gal, 2006). This can unintentionally reproduce the very inequalities such efforts aim to challenge.

Language shift must be understood not as an inevitable outcome of modernisation but as a politically-charged process shaped by historical inequalities, ideological power structures, and contested identities. Through a postcolonial sociolinguistic lens, we can reframe shift not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a site of cultural struggle and resistance. (Pennycook, 1998; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Bourdieu, 1991).

4.5 *Pidgin and creole formation*

A *pidgin* is a simplified contact language that develops between speakers of different native languages for basic communication, often in contexts such as trade or colonisation, and has no native speakers (Holm, 2000). In contrast, a *creole* emerges when a pidgin becomes the first language of a community and expands in complexity to meet the full communicative needs of its speakers (Mufwene, 2001). While pidgins are typically limited in vocabulary and

grammar, creoles evolve into fully developed languages with stable grammar and rich expressive capacity. Crucially, creoles often retain the lexicon of the dominant language (*lexifier*) and reflect the grammatical influence of subordinate native languages (*substrates*), highlighting the asymmetrical power relations that shape their development (Patrick, 2004).

Jamaican Creole, also known as Patwa, is an English-based creole that developed during the colonial era on Jamaican plantations, where enslaved Africans and English-speaking colonisers needed a common means of communication. Emerging initially as a pidgin, it evolved into a fully-fledged creole language as it became the first language of successive generations (Holm, 2000). English serves as the lexifier, supplying most of the vocabulary, while various West African languages such as Akan and Yoruba act as substrates, influencing its grammar, phonology, and aspectual system (Patrick, 2004). Despite its linguistic richness and cultural significance, Jamaican Creole has long been marginalised in education and formal discourse, existing in a diglossic relationship with English, which holds higher prestige (Ferguson, 1959). Critically, this marginalisation reflects enduring colonial ideologies that equate linguistic legitimacy with proximity to European norms. Recognising Jamaican Creole as a fully autonomous language, rather than a 'broken' form of English, challenges these power-laden hierarchies and affirms the linguistic agency of its speakers. Surprisingly, this critique extends to the study of linguistics itself, which has historically framed creoles as simplified or exceptional languages, a view vigorously challenged by DeGraff (2005), who argues for their recognition as full linguistic systems shaped by complex sociopolitical histories.

The preceding sections have detailed a range of linguistic outcomes of dialect and language contact along with brief insights into the social implications of linguistic contact scenarios. In the next section, I bring together these implications and elaborate further.

5. Revisiting the social implications of linguistic contact

In the discussion above, we have seen how dialect and language contact are not only purely linguistic phenomena but are closely intertwined with broader socio-cultural forces. These processes bring both positive and negative consequences, extending beyond linguistic change to affect identity, power, and social inclusion.

On the positive side, contact often fosters linguistic innovation through the merging of features from multiple varieties. This is evident in phenomena such as pidgin and creole formation, as well emerging varieties like Multicultural London English (MLE), where diverse dialects of English are reallocated to express new social identities (Mufwene, 2001; Kerswill & Williams, 2000). Additionally, contact facilitates cultural exchange, particularly through lexical borrowing and code-switching (Matras, 2009; Haspelmath, 2009). Nevertheless, a number of challenges do arise as a result of linguistic contact.

One major concern is language shift and death, particularly for minority languages, when they are displaced by more dominant languages, often due to institutional policies, inter-generational issues, and socioeconomic marginalisation as demonstrated by the case of Southern Khams Tibetan (Peters, 2013). Contact situations frequently involve power imbalances, where dominant languages or dialects impose norms that suppress local varieties, as seen in the convergence toward prestigious forms in Tunisia and the marginalisation of Bedouin features in Egypt (S'hiri, 2002; de Jong, 1996). Additionally, stigmatisation of mixed varieties remains a persistent issue. Creoles, for instance, are often dismissed as 'broken' or inferior languages, despite their structural complexity and cultural richness, as the case of Jamaican Creole illustrates (Patrick, 2004).

Ultimately, the social implications of language and dialect contact reveal how linguistic practices are entwined with broader questions of power, identity, and resistance. While contact promotes inclusivity and innovation, it can also reinforce hierarchies and contribute to cultural loss if not critically understood and addressed.

6. Conclusion

This discussion has highlighted both the linguistic processes involved in language and dialect contact as well as the social dynamics that shape and stem from language and dialect contact. While dialect contact involves the processes of change that take place to different varieties of a single language (e.g., levelling, accommodation, reallocation), language contact involves several, sometimes very different languages, and can lead to different outcomes, such as lexical borrowing, code-switching, language shift, and the development of new languages, such as creoles. Despite their distinct scopes, both forms of contact reveal how social structures, such as power relations and identity politics, play an influential role in driving linguistic change. Ultimately, understanding these processes helps deepen our

understanding of language evolution, but it also draws attention to the impact of linguistic mechanisms on cultural and societal patterns. As such, the study of linguistic contact is as much about people and their interactions as it is about language itself.

4393 words

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