Xiang Dialects

Mandarin 普通话 (putonghua, literally “commoner’s language”) is the standard Chinese language. Apart from Mandarin, there are other languages and dialects spoken in China. Xiang 湘 is one of the ten main Chinese Han 汉 dialects, and is spoken primarily throughout Hunan Province.

The Xiang dialect group is one of the recognized ten dialect groups of spoken Chinese. Some 34 million people throughout Hunan Province speak one of the Xiang dialects. Speakers are also found in Sichuan and Guangxi provinces.

The Xiang dialect group is further divided into New Xiang (spoken in the north) and Old Xiang (spoken in the south). Within these classifications are three further subdialect groups and an unclassified number of subgroups. There are some distinctive features between New Xiang and Old Xiang at the grammatical and sound levels. However, both the Old Xiang and New Xiang dialects have more features in common than differences. The representative of New Xiang is the Changsha dialect, which is spoken in the capital city of Hunan, and the representative of Old Xiang is the Shuangfeng dialect. Communications between speakers of New Xiang and Old Xiang are not always possible.

Origins of Xiang Dialects

The name Xiang comes from the major river in Hunan. Modern Xiang evolved from the language of the Chu kingdom, which was established in the third century CE, but it was greatly influenced by northern Chinese (Mandarin) at various times. The Chu kingdom occupied modern Hubei and Hunan provinces. Some records of the vocabulary used in the Chu kingdom areas can be found in Fangyan, compiled by Yang Xiong (53 BCE–18 CE), and Shuowen jiezi, compiled by Xu Shen in 100 CE. Both works give the impression that the dialect spoken in the Chu kingdom had some strong local features.

The dialects spoken in Chu were influenced strongly by northern Chinese migrants. The first group of migrants came into Hunan in 307–312 CE. Most of them came from Henan and Shanxi provinces and occupied Anxiang, Huarong, and Lixian in Hunan. In the mid-Tang dynasty, a large group of northern people came to Hunan following the Yuan River into western Hunan. The third wave of migrants arrived at the end of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1126). Most migrants came to areas in northern Hunan, such as Changde and Lixian. The Xiang dialects today are surrounded by Mandarin in the north, west, and south, and by Gan and Hakka in the east. The different dialects spoken by migrants have had a great effect on the Xiang dialects.

Official government policy since the 1920s, and especially since 1955, has encouraged the use of standard Mandarin (putonghua, literally “Commoner’s language”). All aspects of the Xiang dialects have felt the effects of this policy. For example, in Changsha, there are three speech codes: spoken Changsha, the local regional dialect used to communicate in everyday life; reading Changsha, a dialect system of literary pronunciation used solely for reading aloud, dictating newspapers or letters, and performing
local operas and plays; and *suliao putonghua*, or “plastic Mandarin,” an expression used by people in Changsha to mock the fact that they are not native speakers of Mandarin and their Mandarin does not sound natural. Plastic Mandarin can be heard in schools and at some formal events, such as conferences. Generally speaking, the code of reading Changsha acts as a bridge for new sounds and new words from Mandarin into the Changsha dialect. In the twentieth century, the sound system of the Changsha dialect underwent a lot of changes because of the influence of Mandarin. For example, there are four tones in Mandarin but six in the Changsha dialect. The words *dòng 冻* and *dòng 洞* share the same sound in Mandarin but differ in the Changsha dialect: 冻 *dòng* has a high rising tone while 洞 *dòng* has a low falling tone. In the twentieth century, many words with a falling tone shifted to a rising tone. In other words, 冻 冻 and 冻 冻 have become homophones, as they are in Mandarin. It is possible that the Changsha dialect eventually will lose the low falling tone and go from six tones to five.

**Sound System Features**

Although different in some respects, in general, the Xiang dialects have some of the same phonological (speech system) features. For instance, most Xiang dialects possess five or six tones. The Middle Chinese (a term for historical
Chinese phonology, which refers to Chinese spoken from the sixth to tenth centuries) ｒｕ 入 tone is retained as one tonal category in the Xiang dialects. For example, the numbers ｙｉ “one,” ｓｈｉ 十 “ten,” ｂａｉ 百 “hundred,” and ｌｉｕ 六 “six” belong to ｒｕ 入 tone category in Middle Chinese. In the Xiang dialect, these four words still share a rising tone while in Mandarin the word “one” has a level tone, “ten” a rising tone, “hundred” a falling-rising tone, and “six” a falling tone.

The most significant feature of the Xiang dialects is the retention of the contrast between Middle Chinese voiced and voiceless consonants (just like the difference between the English /b/ and /p/ in “bet” and “pet”), since this contrast has been lost in most other Chinese dialects.

### Morphological Features

Morphemes are the smallest meaningful units used to form words. In Xiang about 15 percent of morphemes have no correspondences in Mandarin. For example, in Mandarin the verb “to lie” is ｐｉａｎ 骗 while in the Xiang dialect, it is [ｃｏ] with a rising tone. Ｐｉａｎ 骗 does not have a phonological correspondence with [ｃｏ]. We don’t know its written form. We don’t know where the word [ｃｏ] comes from. It might be a borrowed from some other language, or it might be an independent development of the Xiang dialect itself. Linguists have been trying to find the etymology of these words from early dictionaries and documents, but, so far, only a small proportion has been identified.

There are three main types of word formations for words of more than two morphemes in Chinese. They are compounds, such as ｆｕｍá 父母 (father + mother) “parents”; reduplications, such as ｍáｍá 妈妈 (mother + mother) “mother”; and affixations such as ｌａｏｈú 老虎 (prefix + tiger) “tiger”; or ｚｈｕōｚǐ 桌子 (table + suffix) “table.” In the Xiang dialects, affixation is much more common than it is in Mandarin, but reduplication is not commonly employed. In the twentieth century, some new morphemes were borrowed into Xiang. For example, the local kinship terms and Mandarin kinship terms coexist in the Changsha dialect: ｙé 爷 and ｎｉǎng 娘 are local terms for father and mother; ｂàba 爸爸 and ｍáma 妈妈 are borrowed terms. The borrowed terms have brought not only new morphemes (words) into Xiang but also the reduplicative formation.

### Grammatical Features

There are many features of grammar in the Xiang dialects that distinguish them from Mandarin and other Chinese dialects or languages.

In Mandarin, there is no distinction between the attributive particle and nominalized particle. For example, in the expressions ｗò ｄé ｓｈū 我的书, “my book” (ｄｅ = attributive particle) and ｓｈù ｓｈì ｗò ｄｅ 书是我的, “the book belongs to me” (ｄｅ = nominalized particle), both the attributive and nominalized particle is ｄｅ 的. In New Xiang both particles are cognates of ｄｅ 的 while in Old Xiang they are cognates with ｇｅ 个 (scholars are still debating the lexical source of ｇｅ 个). In some localities of Old Xiang—such as Qiyang, Qidong, and Xinhua—however, there is a distinction between the two particles. In the Qiyang dialect, the attributive is [ｋｅ] while the nominalized is [ｋａｕ]. That is to say, ｗò ｄé ｓｈū 我的书, “my book,” in the Qiyang dialect would be ｗò [ｋｅ] ｓｈù 我的书, (ｋａｕ = nominalized particle). This type of distinction occurred before the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) but disappeared in Mandarin as well as in most Xiang localities.

In written language the passive construction first appeared before the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) while disposal constructions first appeared in the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). In Mandarin the passive marker derived from a verb with a passive meaning (ｂèi 被), “to be covered, to suffer,” as used in Ｂèizi bèi mèimei daˇpò le 杯子被妹妹打破了 [glass + passive marker + younger sister + to hit + complement + aspectual marker] “The glass was broken by (my) sister”) or while the disposal marker derived from a verb with an active meaning (ｐà 把), “to hold,” as used in Mèimei bˇèi zi daˇpò le 妹妹把杯子打破了 [younger sister + disposal marker + glass + to hit + complement + aspectual marker] “My sister broke the cup”). In Xiang, however, both passive markers and disposal markers derived from active verbs meaning “to give” or “to take,” such as ｐà 把, “to hold, to give;” or ｄé 得, “to gain, to give;” or ｎá 拿, “to take.” More interestingly, there are even some localities such as Lengshuijiang, where both passive and disposal constructions share the same marker: ｎá 拿, “to take.”

The sentence ｚｈａｎｇ ｓａｎ ｎａ ｌｉｓｉ ｓａ ｌē 张三拿李四杀了 in the Lengshuijiang dialect can have two readings: “Zhang San killed Lisi” and “Zhang San was killed by Lisi.” In addition,
in Xiang dialects, these two constructions are not as active as they are in Mandarin. Instead of forming a request as in “to open the door,” (bǎ mén dà kā 把门打开 [disposal marker + door + to open + complement]), in Mandarin a direct order is more likely to be heard (kāi kāi mén [to open + complement + door] “open the door”). Now the Mandarin passive markers and disposal markers have come into the local system. In many localities, the local forms and the borrowed forms coexist.

Word order is very important to meaning in many languages. The most distinctive feature of Xiang word order is the position of the object. In Mandarin the word order for double objects is [verb + indirect object + direct object], for example gěi tâ shû 给他书 [to give + he + book] “give him a book”; but in Xiang it is [verb + direct object + indirect object] gěi shû tâ 给书他 [to give + book + he] “give a book to him.”

In Mandarin if a verb takes both an object and a complement, the word order is [verb + complement + object], such as in gàn shàng chè le 赶上车了 [to catch + complement + bus + particle] “have caught up to the bus.” In Xiang positive sentences share the same order as Mandarin, but negative sentences have a different order [verb + object + complement]: gàn bú shàng chè 赶不上车 [to catch + no + complement + bus] “unable to catch the bus” or găn chè bú dào 赶车不到 [to catch + bus + no + complement] “unable to catch the bus”. If a verb indicates a common action in everyday life, such as “wish to eat, wish to drink, or wish to sleep,” the construction in Mandarin is [xiāng 想 “to wish” + verb + object]. The word order in the Changsha dialect is [xiāng 想 “to wish” + object + verb]; xiāng chī fàn 想吃饭 [to wish + to eat + rice] “(I) want to eat (now)” in Mandarin but xiāng fàn chī 想饭吃 [to wish + rice + to eat] in the Xiang dialects. All of these Mandarin constructions have come into Xiang and coexist with the local constructions.

Studies of Xiang Dialects

There have been three general surveys of dialects spoken in Hunan. All three include the Xiang dialects. The first survey covered seventy-five localities and was conducted by a team under the leadership of Chao Yuenren in 1935. The results were not published until 1974, by Yang Shifeng. The second was conducted by the Chinese department of Hunan Normal University between 1956 and 1959 (and published in 1960) and covered eighty-one localities. The third survey started in 1987 and was conducted by a team led by Li Yongming and Bao Houxing. It covered 102 localities of which twenty-two were studied in detail. Since the late 1990s, much work has been done on different aspects of the Xiang dialects, especially grammar, which had been overlooked in the past.

A five-volume series with descriptions of phonology, vocabulary, and grammar of the Xiang dialects, edited by Bao Houxing, was launched at the first International Conference of the Xiang Dialects held in Changsha in 2006. Scholars working in the Xiang dialects are very active. More important, more and more postgraduate students are engaged in the research of the Xiang dialects.

Most research in the Xiang dialects so far has been descriptive work on contemporary dialects. More detailed descriptions of different localities of Xiang, especially the localities in the remote areas, are needed. But studies from historical and comparative points of view also are important. There is a need to put Xiang on the big map of universal linguistics, in the interests of linguistic studies in general.

Yunji WU

Further Reading

He who stays near vermilion gets stained red; he who stays near ink gets stained black.

近朱者赤，近墨者黑

Jin zhū zhě chì, jìn mò zhě hēi