

Hakka Languages

Kèjiāhuà 客家话

The Hakka dialect group is very widely dispersed in the southern part of China due to different migration waves of different periods. As a result of historical sound changes and contact with other dialect groups, the unique criterion for distinguishing Hakka from other non-Hakka dialects is still unsettled.

The Hakka languages, or dialects, are one of the seven major language groups in China. (The other groups are Mandarin, Wu, Yue, Gan, Min, and Xiang). Hakka is also known as Aihua, Majiehua, Xinminhua, and Tuguangdonghua. In China Hakka is spoken in Guangdong, Fujian, Xiangxi, Hunan, and Sichuan provinces, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and in Taiwan. Outside of China Hakka speakers are found in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. Estimates place the number of speakers worldwide at about 80 million.

Historical Hakka

Hakka comes from the Cantonese roots *hak* (guest) and *ka* (family/people). According to the historical records, five major migration waves of Hakka-speaking people, from the central plains of China to the south, have occurred. The first began during the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420 CE). The Hakka-speaking people moved because

of various non-Chinese invasions, civil wars, and clashes with local peoples. The term *Hakka* first appeared in Chinese historical documents during the Song dynasty (960–1279). During the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and early Qing dynasty (1644–1912), Hakka-speaking people migrated to northeastern Guangdong province. There they clashed with indigenous peoples over farmland. The local peoples referred to these new immigrants as Hakka. Squabbling between the Hakka and the indigenous population continued well into the twentieth century and contributed to the Hakka's famed strong sense of ethnic and linguistic identity. The Hakka's devotion to their mother tongue is illustrated by the well-known family precept, "One would rather sell one's ancestors' land than to forget one's ancestors' speech."

Characteristics of Hakka Dialects

Because of the different destinations of the various waves of Hakka migration, several distinct Hakka dialects have developed. The standard is considered the Meixian dialect, spoken in northeastern Guangdong Province.

Hakka differs in a number of ways from Standard Chinese. Hakka, like Chinese, uses tone, the musical pitch of the voice, as a way to convey meaning in speech. Since the rise of Middle Chinese (about the seventh century CE), tones in Chinese have been classified into four categories: *ping* (even tone), *shang* (rising tone), *qu* (going tone), and *ru* (entering tone). Each tone may have undergone some



A Hakka woman in a traditional hat often worn in the fields. Guangzhou, Guangdong Province.

PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

further split into two subcategories, *yin* and *yang*. But each tone category has evolved into different types of pitches, or tonal values, as reflected in modern Hakka dialects. Meixian Hakka has six tones: *yin ping* (high level), *yang ping* (low level), *shang* (low falling), *qu* (high falling), *yin ru* (short low level), and *yang ru* (short high level). Meixian Hakka has seventeen consonants: p, p', m, f, v, t, t', n, l, ts, ts', s, ng(ñ), k, k', h, o (zero initial); six (main) vowels: i, ü, u, e, a, o; and three pairs of consonant endings: -m/-p,

-n/-t, -ng/-k. The sounds represented by *m* and *ng* can also occur alone as distinct syllables.

The Hakka dialects are further set apart from other major Chinese dialects by their unique sounds, vocabulary, and use of word order. For instance, in the sound system of Hakka dialects, the sounds in Chinese represented by *b*, *d*, *g*, *v*, and *z* at the beginning of words are pronounced, respectively, *p*, *t*, *k*, *f*, and *s*. Also, most of the sounds in Middle Chinese represented by *h* are pronounced as *f* in Hakka.

Because the Hakka dialects share some common sound features and vocabulary items with Gan, Yue, and Min, some linguists have argued that the Hakka dialects should be grouped with Gan to form a Gan-Hakka language group. Others have assigned the Hakka dialects to a different group. And others have suggested that the Hakka dialects should be considered subdialects of the Gan-Yue dialect group. The current view is to treat Hakka as a separate language group.

Margaret Mian YAN

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