

## Dialect acquisition and exogamy in a Zhuang minority village in southern China

Exogamy is practiced in many rural minority villages in East and Southeast Asia. As women marry into different villages, dialects often come into contact. This provides a valuable “laboratory” to study variation in adult dialect acquisition (DA). To what extent do in-married wives acquire local dialect features? Does DA vary in different societies? Why? Our study helps answer these questions by investigating a Zhuang village in Guangxi, China, and comparing the results to other societies. Our results show how cultural expectations and differing levels of mutual intelligibility cause variation in DA. We also consider our results with respect to Chambers’ DA model (1992).

A summary of prior work on mobility and DA suggests that, all other things being equal, in-migrating adults tend to acquire local dialect features to a significant measurable degree, but not native proficiency (Stanford 2008a:415-16, citing Munro et al. 1999, Bortoni-Ricardo 1985, Trudgill 1986, Chambers 1992 *inter alia*). The amount of DA varies: For the Sui people of Guizhou, China, in-married wives retain their original dialect to a high degree (Stanford 2008a-b, 2009a-b). By contrast, in Hmong cross-dialectal marriages (White Hmong and Green Mong), in-marrying wives traditionally acquire the dialect of the husband’s family (Stanford 2010).

Zhuang is a tonal Tai-Kadai language, and prior research includes structural, comparative, and dialect descriptions (Pan 2010, Luo 2008, Wei & Qin 1979, Bodomo 2007, J. Zhang et al. 1999, Edmondson 1994, Yan 1994, Y. Zhang & Wei 1997). The present study is the first variationist sociolinguistic investigation of Zhuang in-marriage. One of the co-authors, a Zhuang native-speaker, recorded 25 interviews in her home village of Butou in the Yongnan dialect region (Qin Zhou, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region): 15 lifelong Butou village residents (the control group) and 10 women who had in-married from the Youjiang and Yongbei dialect regions. Interviewees identified the names of 73 objects in a picture list and responded to ethnographic questions. Examples of linguistic variables are given below: (a) Butou village and (b) the in-marrying women’s original home region (Tiandong region of Youjiang is shown here). Tones are listed on a 1-5 pitch scale, e.g., 13=low-rising, 53=high-falling, and so on.

Variables	Examples:	(a) Butou village	(b) Tiandong region	English
1. n/?d		naŋ <sup>44</sup>	?daŋ <sup>11</sup>	‘nose’
2. u/ʉ		fʉŋ <sup>33</sup>	fʉŋ <sup>31</sup>	‘hand’
3. u/o		luk <sup>22</sup>	lok <sup>31</sup>	‘bird’
4. k/tɛ		kau <sup>24</sup>	teau <sup>55</sup>	‘head’
5. Aspiration		t <sup>h</sup> uŋ <sup>22</sup>	tʉŋ <sup>33</sup>	‘belly’
6. Tone: 33 vs. 31		wa:i <sup>33</sup>	wa:i <sup>31</sup>	‘ox’
7. Tone: 22 vs. 55		hau <sup>22</sup>	hau <sup>55</sup>	‘paddy rice’
Lexical examples:		t <sup>h</sup> uŋ <sup>22</sup> -he:ŋ <sup>53</sup>	pi: <sup>11</sup> -ka: <sup>11</sup>	‘leg’
		fan <sup>33</sup>	heu <sup>55</sup>	‘tooth’
		pa: <sup>24</sup> -nap <sup>11</sup>	nap <sup>33</sup> -pe: <sup>55</sup>	‘lightning’

Quantitative and acoustic analysis suggests that the in-married women largely acquired the local dialect in terms of lexical variables, vowels, most consonants, and tones: 96% average consistency with the Butou dialect in those variables. However, they did not acquire the aspirated stop consonants (Variable 5 above). Praat acoustic analysis shows significant VOT differences between the control group and the in-married women for these consonants.

Analysis: First, the aspiration results support Chambers’ DA principle that “lexical replacements are acquired faster than pronunciation and phonological variants” (1992). The lack of aspirated stops in certain Zhuang dialects is a topic of overt comment and playful banter: In-migrated speakers are often aware that they do not consistently produce the local dialect’s aspirated stops, yet they are unable to fully acquire them. Secondly, our research suggests that exogamous DA depends on two major factors: (1) *Mutual intelligibility*. The Zhuang women in the study in-married from long distances, both geographically (~140-240 km) and linguistically (Northern to Southern Zhuang). They describe their DA as motivated by practical needs of communication. By contrast, most Sui women in-marry from nearby villages (5-30 km) with a high degree of mutual intelligibility. (2) *Cultural expectations* are important as well. Zhuang speakers report that in-marrying women from nearby, mutually intelligible regions acquire the local Butou village dialect, as do the women in-marrying from longer distances. By contrast, Sui in-married wives maintain strong loyalties to their original home dialects. In this way, the Zhuang more closely resemble the Hmong, where in-married wives traditionally acquire the husband’s dialect as an index of loyalty.

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The Zhuang people are an ethnic minority of southern China centered in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Zhuang is a Tai-Kadai language (Diller, Edmondson & Luo 2008), and the term Zhuang covers a wide geographic and linguistic range. This project compares lifelong residents of Butou village (Changtan Township, Qinbei District, Qinzhou) to women who married into that village from the Youjiang dialect region. In some parts of Guangxi, Chinese is replacing Zhuang, but in Butou village daily conversation is in Zhuang, and village children are raised speaking Zhuang.

