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Dialects or Standard Languages

The National Council of Teachers of English affirms “the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language – the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style.” (586) This leads to a public controversy. Many people hold the opinion that the dialects have no validity while the others strongly disagree with it. Dialects contribute to the diversity of countries, present the culture and history of the regions and they are very useful in specific areas. Therefore, I argue that the students should study dialects but also be fluent in the standard languages.

Because of the diversity endowed to the society, it’s necessary for the dialects to be preserved and studied. Japanese is a language with many dialects. The dialect speaking in Tokyo is very closed to the standard Japanese. Kansai Dialect is an influential dialect in Japan. Citizens who live in Osaka, Kyoto, Kobe and the nearby areas speak it. The Kansai Dialect has a higher tone than the Tokyo dialect, and it’s not as clear as the Tokyo dialect. Incomplete sentences also appear a lot in the Kansai Dialect. It contributes and also reflects the citizens of Kansai region’s characteristics. They are sloppier, more passionate, like to be casual and they talk louder. To the contrary, the Tokyo dialect is very clear and gentle, includes mostly complete sentences and has a lower tone. As a result, citizens of Tokyo are mostly very gender and polite, they don’t talk loud and they pay much attention to details. In her article *Lost in Translation*, Lera Boroditsky states that“the idea that language might shape thought was for a long time considered untestable at best and more often simply crazy and wrong. Now, a flurry of new cognitive science research is showing that in fact, language does profoundly influence how we see the world.” Therefore, having different groups of dialect speaking people is having citizens with vary ways of thinking. To broaden the thought and the horizon of a nation, it is important to value all the dialects.

The dialects do show the diversity, but this doesn’t mean a dialect is only a branch of a language. It is the mirror reflecting the culture of the area, the ideology of the speakers, and the heritage of history. The perspective that the differences between a foreign languages and dialects are only existed in pronunciations, tones and grammars is definitely incorrect. The most famous two kinds of Chinese are mandarin and Cantonese. People know that those two are different but they might not know the Mandarins or Cantoneses speaking in two regions are not always the same. The Taiwanese mandarin and the mandarin spoke in Mainland China have some slight differences. Due to Japan’s colonial rule for 50 years, not only the economics and politics were affected, but also the language. Taiwanese still use few Japanese words. It’s very often to hear them saying “Obasan” (“old lady” in Japanese) instead of “Lao-Nai-Nai” (“old lady” in standard Chinese). Taiwanese use many words which sounds like Japanese or pronounce the Japanese words in Chinese way (One writing system in Japanese is Chinese Characters but the pronunciations are totally different). Because of this dialect, Taiwanese get familiar with the Japanese language. This contributes to the Taiwanese ideology that Japan has some influences on the development of Taiwan and many citizens choose Japan to be the first foreign country they are visiting. They will also remember the history of the colonial domination. Amy Tan, the second generation of Chines immigrant, mentions the switch of her English in her Essay *Mother Tongue*. She spoke “broken English” with her mom and Standard English with the others. (712) The “broken English” can be considered a dialect spoken only in her family. It doesn’t show the history of California where she lives, but it reflects the past of her family – her mom is an immigrant from China. The “dialect” also shapes her mind and makes her different from the other residents in California who born in English-speaking families. All dialects are representatives of the history or culture of regions. They are worth to be known and investigated.

The dialects are not only very meaningful, but also very useful. When communicating with a group of people from specific region, speaking their dialect is a way to build an intimate relationship with them. Even mandarin is required to be taught in schools recent years, not everybody can speak it. In his essay *Sociolinguistics*, Branch states that more than half of Chinese citizens are born with dialects as their first languages.(1) The ability to speak the dialects is extremely important in many regions of China especially the Southern part. Those different provinces can be considered as different discourse communities. Dialects are the required languages in those discourse communities. Patric Bizzell has mentioned in her essay *Hybrid Academic Discourses: What, Why, How* that “in a discourse community, shared conventions of language use affect social status, world view, and work. These elements are so powerful that the discourse could be said to take on a life of its own, independent of individual participants; it could be said, even, to ‘create’ the participants that suit its conventions by allowing individuals no other options if they wish to be counted as participants.” The residents of those discourse communities share the same view, and they do need the dialects to explain their opinions clearly. The dialects are the exclusive language in the discourse communities and they are valuable and useful.

The dialects do have significant meanings to the language, but the standard language is always the most important one. It’s necessary to require all the students to be fluent in the standard languages for several reasons. First, it will really be convenient if there is a language being in common use by the citizens of one country. No matter where an individual is in the country, he or she can communicate with local people with no obstructions. Since the relationships between different countries are getting more intimate these years, standard language is really important. Standard languages are showing their benefits when two countries are having some diplomatic activities or international games are holding. To make most people understand what is going on, multiple languages are required to be used. It has already taken a long time for the officials to go over all the standard languages. If the dialects are also used, the translation takes almost half of the time. When the major part of the activity starts, everyone is getting tired. Standard languages help saving much time. Second, the standard languages are necessary to be used in some formal situations. It is so ridiculous for the dialects to be used in the court, in a meeting or in a symposium. Sometimes, some accent or pronunciation in one dialect sounds funny to the ones who don’t speak that dialect. It is difficult for everyone to be serious in a formal situation if they are hearing a dialect. Also, because dialects are considered informal, they won’t be suitable for the atmosphere and would not be accepted by the experts and scholars. Third, in majority countries in the world, second language or even third language are required to be studied at school. If most people are not fluent at the standard language, it will not be so attractive to the foreigners because they can only talk to few people after studying it. If the native standard language speakers will have problems communicating with the dialect speakers, it will be even harder for the foreigners. Furthermore, contrary to some dialects that keep lots of ancient pronunciations, most standard languages are very new. They absorb fresh stuff as time goes by so they become very modern. It is the reflection of the development of the country.

Some people might say that it takes a long time to study both the dialect and the standard language. Like the old saying, “you can’t have your cake and eat it too.” Actually this is not as difficult as they think. Teaching dialects at school doesn’t mean it has to be a required course for everyone. Also, studying the dialects doesn’t mean you have to be professional in it. In regions where people speak standard languages in everyday life, dialects can be elective courses. Because they don’t have the dialect surroundings, studying dialects can be very difficult. But it’s very different for students who live in the regions where people speak dialects. They grow up with the dialect-speaking environment so they can study it without spending lots of time on it. But it is really important for them to be fluent in standard languages since that’s much more useful. Students can spend most of the time on studying the standard languages and standard languages should be used in all the classes except for the dialect course. Then they can spend little time on studying the dialect and get to know the culture and history behind it.

Some of the dialect-defenders hold the opinion that the promotion of standard languages endangers the existence of dialects. From their perspectives, being fluent in standard languages will cause some one to be influent in the dialects. People may start using the pronunciation and vocabulary words that should only be used in standard language in the dialect, thus, a dialect becomes the mixture of the original dialect and the standard language. This leads the disruption of the original cultural heritage. I strongly disagree with this opinion. First, being fluent in the standard language should not have any effects on the fluency of dialect as long as citizens are speaking both in their life. As the relationships between different nations are getting more intimate these years, a great number of people speak two languages, some even study the third or fourth language. There’s no reason that one can be fluent in two languages but not two dialects in the same language. Second, as I mentioned above, dialects can reflect the culture and history of a region. People should not worry about dialects including some standard languages elements because this shows the local government or organizations are trying to spread the standard languages. It also gives the posterity an idea that at this period, the regions has close ties to the other regions in the same country. Two thousands years ago, the dialect of one area was distinctly different from the one we use now. It has changed hundred of times. The “original dialect” which all the dialect defenders want to protect is not really original. Times changed, and the languages should change with them.

Due to the diversity, culture, and the usefulness, we have to keep the dialects and regard them as important parts of languages. But because of their limitations, dialects should not be studied professionally except for the ones who are investigate the culture and history of the region. Standard languages should be strongly encouraged. Everyone has to be fluent in the standard languages in order to communicate with people coming from different areas in the same country. It saves individuals’ time and they get the benefits of both standard languages and dialects.

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