

Towards a more comprehensive understanding of Qiang dialectology: New evidence from the Yonghe Qiang

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Abstract

Qiang language varieties belong to the Qiangic branch of Tibeto-Burman. Ethnic Qiang people live in Aba Prefecture, Sichuan, China. The main locus of Qiang speakers are in Heishui, Mao, Wen, and Li counties. Qiang varieties have been presented as belonging to two languages, Northern and Southern on the basis of certain typological features (H. Sun, 1981). This hypothesis, that Qiang varieties fall neatly into northern and southern categories, has remained largely unchallenged throughout the years although there has been some disagreement as to whether certain dialects should be considered northern or southern (LaPolla, 2003). Other research has brought to light that some varieties that do not conform to the prescribed typological characteristics of the north-south paradigm (Huang, 2007). One such variety is the Yonghe lect, which is spoken in Mao County, Yonghe Township. Yonghe, having a population of approximately 4,000 people, has not been mentioned in any literature on Qiang dialectology. Speakers of Yonghe share low intelligibility with speakers of Southern and Northern Qiang varieties. Speakers of Yonghe do share high intelligibility with speakers in the neighboring Goukou Township, which has been described as belonging to the Heihui dialect of Southern Qiang (Liu 1998). This paper presents a phonological analysis of Yonghe which provides insights useful for the comparison of Yonghe to the other varieties of Qiang that have been classified as either Northern or Southern. In addition to phonological comparisons, isogloss bundles and intelligibility testing further strengthen these comparisons. This paper demonstrates that there is low intelligibility between the speakers of Yonghe and speakers of other Qiang varieties other than Goukou. In addition, phonological differences between Yonghe and other Qiang varieties reveal that Yonghe is as dissimilar to the varieties of Qiang classified as “Northern” as it is to the “Southern” dialects spoken in Lixian, Wenchuan and Maoxian. Thus, this paper concludes that the variety of Qiang spoken in Yonghe and Goukou should be considered a distinct synchronic language on grounds of shared phonological innovations, intelligibility phenomena, lexical similarity, as well as ethnolinguistic and cultural identity. Lastly a cluster approach to Qiang dialectology is presented as a more comprehensive way of understanding Qiang language varieties.

References

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