

When Your Mother Tongue is Not Your Mother's Tongue: Linguistic Reflexes of Sui Exogamy

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1 Introduction

Concentrated in the colorful mountainous countryside of southern China, the people of the Sui ethnic minority preserve their own unique customs, world-view, and language. Sociolinguistic investigation of this indigenous minority culture may provide valuable insight not just into the Sui language but also into universal issues of human language variation. In this study, the exogamous marriage system of the Sui people is observed with respect to dialect acquisition. The Sui people maintain ancient marriage practices that require the men of a clan to find wives who are from another clan. As a result, the married women of a village often have dialect features which differ from that of their own husbands and children. According to local folk linguistic understanding, each married woman maintains all the dialect features of her home village regardless of how many years she may live in her husband's village. This study presents the results of field research comparing such Sui folk linguistic notions with empirical observation and offers fresh perspective on dialect acquisition and its relation to social factors found in indigenous minority communities.

The results of this study show that the Sui married women maintain their home dialect with remarkable precision, despite living in their husbands' region for more than a decade and being relatively isolated from their home region. Thus this study finds that the Sui folk linguists are generally correct. Further analysis, however, may show subtle phonetic changes such as acquisition of certain tone features. The results may also suggest an institutionalized dialectology where each married woman is socially expected to resist her husband's dialect.

The Sui exogamous system can therefore serve as a valuable "laboratory" for investigation of numerous issues: dialect acquisition, identity, folk linguistics compared to empirical study, the notion of speech community, and the linguistic roles of women and children in society. Further, Sui culture provides an opportunity to explore the ways in which language variation

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in an indigenous agrarian minority culture may contrast with classic sociolinguistic models that have often described urban majority cultures.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines the linguistic and cultural setting. Section 3 describes the data collection. The results of the study are given in Section 4, and conclusions are provided in Section 5.

2 The Linguistic and Cultural Setting

The linguistic and cultural heartland of the Sui people is located in rural Sandu Sui Autonomous County in the southern part of Guizhou Province, China. A Tai-Kadai minority language, Sui is spoken by about 400,000 people, the great majority of whom (93%) live in Guizhou Province (Wei and Edmondson 2002).

2.1 The Status of Sui

The Sui people report that their language is an important marker of cultural identity and pride, especially since Sui is not a Chinese dialect but rather an ethnic minority language. Sui is the exclusive language spoken whenever only Sui people are present in a given setting. However, increasing interaction with the Han Chinese people, the ethnic majority of China, has led to bilingualism among Sui men; as a result of seasonal employment in Han Chinese areas and other frequent interaction with Chinese speakers, Sui men have generally learned to speak the local variety of Chinese. Thus among Sui men, Chinese is used for communication with Han Chinese speakers in employment, government, and educational environments, while Sui is the language of home, family, agriculture, and oral tradition. Furthermore, although teachers in local elementary schools primarily use the Sui language during the first few grade levels, by 6th grade all instruction is given in Chinese.

However, due to social and economic circumstances, educational opportunities for girls were limited in the past. Women who are currently over 25 years of age are usually monolingual in Sui. Changes in recent years have given the younger generation of women more opportunities for education and travel, so many younger women are becoming bilingual. However, the women in this study fall into the category of monolingual Sui speakers 25 years or older who have had very little interaction outside of Sui regions.

2.2 Dialect Prestige and Intelligibility

The Sui language is generally divided into three main dialect regions which have moderate mutual intelligibility: Sandong Region, Yang'an Region, and Pandong Region (Zhang 1980). The Sandong Region was chosen for this study: Sandong is the largest of the three dialect regions and is the predominant dialect of the central part of Sandu County, which the Sui people consider to be their cultural center. Variation also occurs within the main Sandong region, albeit with a very high level of mutual intelligibility. Numerous different dialect features are observed among villages within Sandong, and these are the features examined in this study.

There is no Sui orthography in use nor any other standardization. Although a Sui orthography was developed by Chinese scholars in the 1950's (cf. Zeng and Yao 1996), it never achieved wide usage among the Sui people. Thus the overwhelming majority of speakers are illiterate in Sui. Chinese is the only written language in use, with the exception of a set of ancient ceremonial Sui characters accessible only to shamans and used only in limited settings (cf. Luo 1992). As a result, no Sui written standardization influences dialect status.

Sui speakers report that no variety is considered more prestigious than another. Moreover, the status of Chinese in the educational system (§2.1) causes Modern Standard Chinese (*putonghua*) to be viewed as the educational standard and prestige language, thus limiting the rise of any one Sui dialect as a perceived standard or prestigious variety.

2.3 Tones

Sui is an isolating, tonal language with a system of contour tones. The pitch values are represented here with a five-pitch scale where 5=high, 1=low (Chao 1930). The specific pitch values given below represent the dialect region centered in Sandong Township (Zeng and Yao 1996). The tone reference numbers correspond to the transcription system traditionally applied to languages of the area (e.g. Zhang 1980, Edmondson and Solnit 1988). Tones 7 and 8 are transcribed for "checked" syllables (here referring to syllables ending in -p, -t, -k)¹. The tones of these checked syllables are further differentiated as S "short vowel" or L "long vowel."

¹Further analysis may show that each of the "checked" tones actually corresponds phonologically to an "unchecked" tone. For example, Tone 5 and Tone 7 may be phonologically equivalent.

Each tone can be matched with its pitch value by noting Tone Reference Number (e.g. Tone #1) and Tone Value (e.g. 13, which is a low rising tone). Since this study is sensitive to variation, tones in the text examples are shown in terms of tone value, rather than reference number.

Unchecked syllables

<i>Reference Number:</i>	<i>Tone #1</i>	<i>Tone #2</i>	<i>Tone #3</i>
<i>Value:</i>	13	31	33

<i>Reference Number:</i>	<i>Tone #4</i>	<i>Tone #5</i>	<i>Tone #6</i>
<i>Value:</i>	52	35	55

Checked syllables

<i>Reference Number:</i>	<i>Tone #7S</i>	<i>Tone #7L</i>	<i>Tone #8S</i>	<i>Tone #8L</i>
<i>Value:</i>	55	35	32	42

2.4 Sui Exogamy

Each Sui village consists of a tightly knit clan such that all the men and children in a village usually have the same surname. Children keep their father's surname for life, regardless of later marriage. According to local custom, a man and woman cannot marry if they both have the same surname² (Luo 1992: 160), thus ensuring that spouses come from different clans: a man is required to marry a woman from another clan. At the time of marriage, a woman is required to move permanently to her husband's village. Thus a clan is a cohesive patrilineal social unit represented by a village or cluster of villages that are geographically separated from other clans. Given this social and geographic separation of one clan from another, it is not surprising to find that a clan often has subtle dialect features distinguishing it from other clans.

Folk-linguistically, the men, children, and unmarried women of each such clan are considered a homogeneous speech community. The Sui people report that a married woman identifies herself with her parents' village and that this identity is reflected by the way she maintains the dialect markers of her home village throughout her life in her husband's village. This leads to intriguing situations where, for example, a woman uses a different 1st Person Singular pronoun than her own husband and children, e.g. *ju*³¹ versus *ej*³¹.

²There are a few cases where local tradition asserts that two groups with the same surname actually belong to historically distinct clans, so marriage is allowed between such groups.

Married women's daily networks are tightly focused on their husband's village. The married women of a given village come from a variety of regions, and they do not typically form networks based on common home regions. That is, although each married woman in a given village necessarily immigrated from another clan, the specific clan depends on the particular personal and family relationships directing each marriage exchange. So a woman's networks are based on solidarity with her husband's extended family within the village and with other married women in the village in general.

Married women's social networks are further restricted by their infrequent interaction with their home villages. Due to the expense of travel and the social status of most Sui women, a married woman is primarily rooted in her husband's village, only periodically interacting with her home village during festivals or occasionally on market days. Village life for married women is centered on the responsibilities of farming and child-raising in her husband's village, with few opportunities for outside employment or other outside interaction. Moreover, the two dialect regions in this study (§3) are separated by ten miles, which is a prohibitive distance under the circumstances. The two regions were not linked by road until 1977, and at the present time, travel between the two regions is still limited due to the fact that very few individuals own motorized vehicles and bus service is expensive relative to low farming income.

Lastly, the diverse home regions of the married women of a given village do not affect the village residents' notion of their village as having a focused dialect: in spite of the linguistic complexity implied by the exogamous factors outlined above, village residents indicate a clear sense of each clan region as being a focused dialect community whose foundation is the men's speech.

3 Data Collection

3.1 Regions Studied

This study examines the dialect features of married women in two dialect regions which are about ten miles apart. These two particular regions were chosen in order to optimize the tension of dialect distinctiveness versus likelihood of marriage exchanges. That is, for two regions separated by only five miles, my initial research suggested that dialect differences would be too limited for a robust study of linguistic effects of exogamous society. But for two regions separated by a much greater distance, such as 15-20 miles or more, marriage exchanges are less likely: in a given village, it is uncommon to find married women who have immigrated from such a distance. There-

fore, a range of ten miles was chosen. The two resulting regions were identified as a “North” dialect (centered around the Shuilong region of Zhonghe Township) and a “South” dialect (Sandong Township region). My previous dialect observations of these two regions provided an outline of potential lexical differences to target and also indicated significant phonological differences.

The speech of women from both regions was studied so that there would not be an issue of markedness between the dialects: That is, if only North women’s dialects were studied, for example, then it might be unclear whether resistance to dialect changes could simply be due to lower markedness in their home dialect region (Dennis Preston, p.c.). Therefore, women from both regions were studied: the dialect features of South women who had married into the North Dialect region were compared with the features of their home region (South) to determine in what ways the women have adjusted their dialect since marriage. These dialect features were then compared with the speech of North women who had married into the South Dialect region.

Each woman who participated in this study had been living in her husband’s village for at least a decade, thus ensuring that the women interviewed had been immersed in a new dialect region for a significant length of time.

The dialect features of men in both regions were used as a baseline for comparison, under the assumption that regional dialect differences significantly outweigh gender differences. Such an assumption is consistent with informants’ reports and prior study.

3.2 The Interviews

Fifteen interviews were conducted in July 2005 in Sandu Sui Autonomous County. The North Dialect recordings were conducted in Zhonghe Township, and the South dialect recordings in Sandong Township.

First, eight interviews were conducted in the North region:

Group S_w

South Dialect women who married into the North, living there in the North from 17 to 43 years (N=3)

Group N_m

North Dialect men who have spent their lives in the North (N=5)

Then, seven interviews were conducted in the South region:

Group N_w

North Dialect women who married into the South, living there in the South from 11 to 25 years (N=3)

Group S_m

South Dialect men who have spent their lives in the South (N=4)

Based on my previous research, about 50 lexical items which vary between the two regions were selected. Free speech samples were also recorded. Since there is no Sui orthography in use and since most Sui women over 25 years old are monolingual, data collection could not depend on traditional word lists and reading passages. Instead, informants were asked to count, describe pictures, and identify physical objects, as well as provide a personal narrative.

The following types of dialect features were studied: lexical variants, phono-lexical variants (called “pronunciation variants” in Chambers 1992), and phonological variants. Syntactic variation between these two regions is minimal and not yet outlined, so syntactic variants were not elicited in this study.

3.2.1 Lexical Variants

Lexical items were chosen which had been shown to have dialect variation in prior work. In addition, for ease of data elicitation in this situation of an unwritten language, concrete objects and activities were necessarily favored when choosing lexical items to study, as seen in the examples below.

<u>South</u>	<u>North</u>	
qəm ⁴²	ku ³³	‘head’
ju ³¹	ej ³¹	1 st Person Singular
ɲon ⁴²	maw ¹³	‘hat’
tɕoj ¹³	li ⁴²	‘to plow’
ʔjɔ ¹³	ma:t ⁴²	‘socks’
ja ⁵⁵	tɕa ³⁵ / ni ³³ / a ³⁵	Discourse Marker
qop ⁵⁵	i ¹³	‘frog’

3.2.2 Phono-Lexical Variants

Phono-lexical variants are defined as those lexical items which show varia-

tion between the two dialects but also show segmental and/or tonal similarities between the two dialects. Further, phono-lexical variants are distinguished from phonological variants since the former appear to be more idiosyncratic than systematic.

Phono-lexical items studied include:

<u>South</u>	<u>North</u>	
qe ⁴²	tɕe ⁴²	'market'
qeŋ ¹³	kɪŋ ¹³	'gruel, e.g. rice gruel'
fa:n ⁵⁵	fwa:n ²⁴	'thread (n.)'
tɕuj ⁵⁵	kuj ¹³	'wardrobe'
ɣɔ ¹³	ŋɔ ⁴²	'spider'

3.2.3 Phonological Variants

Phonological variants are items which represent a systematic process beyond the individual lexical level. The following phonological variants were studied.

- Variation in glides that precede [a].

a. Palatal glides: [-ja] ~ [-iɛ]. Examples:

<u>South</u>	<u>North</u>	
nja ³¹	niɛ ³¹	2nd Person Singular
?mja ¹³	?mie ¹³	'hand'
lja:n ³³	lie:n ³³	'mosquito'
lja:k ³⁵	lie:k ³⁵	'to lick'

b. Labial glides: [-wa] ~ [-ue]. Examples:

<u>South:</u>	<u>North:</u>	
?dwa ¹³	?due ¹³	'salt'
lwa ¹³	lue ¹³	'boat'
twa ³³	tue ³³	Sui New Year
?jwan ¹³	?juen ¹³	'to stand up'

- Tones. (A list of tone reference numbers and tone values is given in §2.3).
 - a. Salient differences: Tone #6 bears the most salient dialect difference of the tones in the two regions. It is a high level 55 tone in the South region but a mid-rising 24 tone in the North.
 - b. Subtle differences: In the North region, Tones #1, #8S, and #8L appear to be slightly lower than they are in the South. Also, Tone #7S may be slightly shorter in the South than in the North.

4 Results

The results are discussed in terms of lexical differences, phono-lexical differences, phonological differences, free speech data, and folk linguistic observations.

4.1 Lexical Variants

Perfect 100% correspondence for lexical items was found according to home dialect region as follows:

- Lexical items for Group S_w (South Dialect women who had married into the North) were identical to lexical items for Group S_m (South Dialect men who had spent their lives in the South).
- Lexical items for Group N_w (North Dialect women who had married into the South) were identical to lexical items for Group N_m (North Dialect men who had spent their lives in the North).

Thus the married women who had immigrated away from their home dialect region still used exactly the same lexical items as the men and children back in their home regions (i.e. the father's dialect). This was the case for the lexical items in the list regardless of frequency of use, e.g. common words like 'to plow' corresponded to the informants' home regions just like less common words like 'frog'. Furthermore, the lexical items corresponded to home region regardless of whether informants were consciously aware of a lexical difference. For example, informants were observed to have declarative knowledge of certain dialectal differences such as 1st Person Singular,

but not of the dialectal differences for 'socks' or 'frog' (§3.2.1), even though they had perfect procedural knowledge of the differences in all cases.

4.2 Phono-Lexical Variants

For phono-lexical items as well, perfect or near-perfect correspondence was found according to home dialect region: Group S_w patterned with Group S_m , and Group N_w patterned with Group N_m . For example, the pronunciation of 'market' (qe^{42} versus $tçe^{42}$) corresponded to each speaker's home region: South women who had married into the North used the same pronunciation as men who had lived in the South all their lives, and North women who had married into the South had the same pronunciation as the North men.

4.3 Phonological Variants

The glide processes (§3.2.3) were also found to have perfect correspondence according to the speakers' home dialect region: for each word supposed to exhibit one of the glide processes, informants used the variant expected of their home dialect region (Group S_w patterned with Group S_m , and Group N_w patterned with Group N_m).

The tone variants (§3.2.3) will be analyzed acoustically during the next phase of this project. Initial impressionistic analysis suggests the following: The married women's tones generally correspond to the expected features of their home dialect regions. However, some suspicious tone pitches in the women's speech may indicate a subtle lowering by South women who moved to the North, and/or a subtle raising by North women who had moved to the South. Since Tone #6 in men's speech is significantly lower in the North than it is in the South, it may be that the women who married into those regions are being affected. Acoustic analysis will be necessary to confirm such a trend.

4.4 Free Speech

In free speech the informants also used the dialect features that corresponded to their home regions. For example, in free speech Groups S_w and S_m both used ju^{31} for 1st Person Singular, while Groups N_w and N_m both used ej^{31} . Thus the men's results match prior observation of North and South pronouns, while the women's results indicate that they conform to their home regions rather than to their husbands' regions.

Discourse markers recorded in free speech are especially interesting since such words are relatively unmonitored, having diverse roles such as a

hedge, or ‘like this’, ‘so’, ‘then’, ‘afterwards’, etc. The discourse marker *ja*⁵⁵ was observed in Groups S_w/S_m while Groups N_w/N_m did not use *ja*⁵⁵. Thus the choice of discourse marker corresponded to the informants’ home dialect regions even though each married woman has been living in the opposite dialect region for more than a decade and even though the discourse markers occurred in free speech and are relatively unmonitored words.

4.5 Folk Linguistic Observations

When asked to describe differences between the North and South dialects, informants usually focused on specific lexical items such as 1st/2nd Person Singular or the discourse marker *ja*⁵⁵ rather than trying to describe systematic processes. They did, however, occasionally mention a difference in “intonation” which may suggest some level of declarative knowledge of systematic tone differences. Moreover, a set phrase *ja*⁵⁵-*ju*³¹ was often used to describe the South dialect. Literally, this is simply a discourse marker placed adjacent to 1st Person Singular, yet it appears to be a folk linguistic way of describing that dialect region.

Informants had a particularly clear understanding of the variations in 1st Person Singular from clan to clan: they displayed an accurate knowledge of this pronoun’s variants for all nearby clans. In fact, one Sui folk linguist speculated that perhaps such pronoun variants were used in ancient times as a distinguishing mark to ensure exogamy among clans.

5 Conclusion

The initial results of this study suggest that married women maintain the dialect features of their home villages with a high degree of precision. Lexical variants, phono-lexical variants, and segmental phonological variants were shown to be consistent with the women’s home regions both in formal styles (counting, identifying objects) and informal styles (free speech samples). Such a result may be considered remarkable since the women have lived in their husbands’ region for more than a decade with only limited contact or networks in their own home region. Even in relatively unmonitored free speech, the discourse markers and pronouns still match each married woman’s home region rather than her husband’s region. Thus the results agree with Sui folk linguistic predictions in general. However, in the next phase of this study, acoustic analysis may reveal subtle phonological changes in the married women’s speech, especially in the tones where impressionistic analysis seems to suggest some acquisition of subtle aspects of

the husbands' tone system.

In addition, folk linguistic observation shows that the Sui people have an accurate declarative knowledge of certain variants across clans, particularly the South dialect's discourse marker *ja*⁵⁵ and the extensive cross-clan variation in 1st Person Singular. Further study may show whether such knowledge represents an institutionalized dialectology that could play a role in constraining married women's acquisition of the husbands' dialect.

This is the first sociolinguistic study conducted among the Sui people besides basic dialect research, so many more issues can be pursued in the future. For example, as shown in this initial study of linguistic reflexes of Sui exogamy, the analysis of such an indigenous agrarian minority culture necessarily touches upon sociolinguistic aspects which go beyond the classic social stratification perspectives that have been used so successfully for analysis of urban majority cultures. While such models have proven effective in relevant communities, Sui exogamous society shows how indigenous minority communities introduce new issues and challenges for sociolinguistics. Moreover, little sociolinguistic work has been conducted among Chinese minorities in general, so further work in this area of rich linguistic complexity may contribute to wider perspectives on human language variation and society.

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