An Introduction to the Wu Dialects*
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Roughly speaking, the Wu dialects are distributed over Zhejiang province and the south of Jiangsu province. They also spread into some parts of southern Anhui province, Shangrao, Yushan & Guangfeng in Jiangxi province and Pucheng in Fujian province (for more details see Fangyan 4. 1984 and Zhengzhang et al (1985)).

1. The Historical Background of the Formation of the Wu Dialects
1.1 The Wu dialects are one of the most complicated dialectal groups. Even though the dialectal divergence is not so great around the Taihu area, neighboring counties are not mutually intelligible beyond the Hangjiahu Plains and the Ningshao Plains. Besides, the Wu dialects have the following features. They do not seem to be the result of split of a single dialect, but the convergence of several sources.

(1) There is a basic lexicon, especially the culture terms, shared by the Wu subdialects, but some basic terms exhibit great divergence. For example, the morpheme ‘person’ is realized variously as of the Zhen 真 rime in northern Wu dialects, the Dong 東 rime in Jinhua, and the Deng 澤 rime in Wenzhou & Qingtian. It is written invariably as a single logograph "人" to stand for a variety of forms in dialectal surveys, and it is difficult to establish a cognate relationship among them. ‘Watch’ is /kʰɔː/ 看 in Shanghainese, /tsʰɻ/ 看 in the Wenzhou dialect, /məŋ¹/ 看 in
the Huangyan dialect, /ʂbian/ in the Lishui dialect. Even in the same subdialectal area the basic lexicon is also different. For example, 'walk' in the Wuzhou subdialectal area is realized as /'tsau/ in Wenzhou, /z du/ in Rui'an and /sɔ/ in Yueqing.

Most noteworthy are some functional words denoting grammatical relationships. Different morphemes may be used to fulfill the same grammatical function in different dialects. Take the Shanghai and Wenzhou dialects. The passive voice is indicated by the function word /pa/ in Shanghainese and /ha/ in the Wenzhou dialect; the sentence-final particle, a perfective aspect marker, is /ɔ/ or /lɔ/ in Shanghainese and /ba/ in the Wenzhou dialect; the particle for the progressive and static aspects is /la hE/ in Shanghainese and /z 1 ta/ in the Wenzhou dialect.

(2) A morpheme has various pronunciations in Wu dialects. In northern Wu dialects, there are generally two kinds of pronunciations traditionally referred to as "literary" and "colloquial" readings. However, southern Wu dialects boast more than two readings. For example, the morphemes in the Ge 楯 rime have 11 kinds of pronunciations in the Wenzhou dialect; some of them are produced by internal sound change, but some obviously reflect aggregates of historical strata (Zhengzhang 1983). The Mo 模 rime is realized as /u/ in Qingtian, but bu 布 in words like buzhang 布帐 and buku 布裤 is pronounced /pa/. The latter form can only be accounted for in terms of the phonological system of Archaic Chinese: *pas > pa1 (cf some Tone 3 morphemes with the glottal stop ending in the Hui & Gan dialects [*-s > -ʔ]). This kind of phonological strata is found in the most far-flung dialects in racially variegated settlements (Norman 1979). The cause and the formation of these historical layers however are far from being ferreted out and explained. A comparison of the Wu dialects and the Hui, Gan, Kejia, Xiang, Min and Yue dialects will turn up many common linguistic features among them: for example, the neutralization of nasal
finals after high vowels, the non-palatal reflex of the Jian series in the second grade, the loss of the retroflex, the cooccurrence restriction of the grave initials (velars and labials) with the rounded medials, etc.

Although the contact in adjoining areas between Wu dialects and Hui, Gan and the east Min dialects can be adduced to account for these similarities, it is extremely difficult to explain the similarities between Wu dialects and Xiang, Yue and south Min dialects in terms of borrowing and influence. It is our belief that the root lies in some kinds of substrata. Thus, one can not have a deep understanding of Wu dialects without a proper understanding of the historical background of their formation.
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