What makes a language... a language? - Martin Hilpert

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1. What are the regional dialects mentioned in the transcript?

○ a.) Spanish and Italian

○ b.) German and Swiss

○ c.) Mandarin and Cantonese

2. What is the main topic of the transcript?

○ a.) The history of Germany

○ b.) The difference between dialects and languages

○ c.) The popularity of soap operas

3. What determines if a form of speech is a dialect or a language?

○ a.) Mutual intelligibility

○ b.) Pronunciation

○ c.) Vocabulary

4. What influenced the classification of languages and dialects?

○ a.) Politics

○ b.) Geography

○ c.) Culture

5. Which dialect became Standard Italian?

○ a.) Roman dialect

○ b.) Florentine dialect

○ c.) Milanese dialect

6. Who promoted standard Italian in Italy?

○ a.) Dante

○ b.) Benito Mussolini

○ c.) Martin Hilpert

7. What is AAVE?

○ a.) A type of Italian dialect

○ b.) A form of African-American Vernacular English

○ c.) A language from Azerbaijan

8. How do linguists refer to different forms of speech?

○ a.) Dialects

○ b.) Varieties

○ c.) Languages

9. What does the transcript say about the differences between varieties of speech?

○ a.) They are very clear cut.

○ b.) They are gradual and overlapping.

○ c.) They do not exist.

10. What is the overall message about human communication?

○ a.) It is simple and easy to understand.

○ b.) It is dynamic and diverse.

○ c.) It is always the same.

Transcript

The distinct forms of speech heard around Bremen, Germany
and Interlaken, Switzerland are considered regional dialects
of the German language. And yet, when someone from Bremen
is visiting the Swiss Alps, the conversations they hear between locals
will likely be incomprehensible to them. Similarly, outside of China, Mandarin and Cantonese are often referred
to as Chinese dialects. But they're even more dissimilar
than Spanish and Italian. On the other hand, speakers of Danish,
Norwegian, and Swedish, which are recognized as three
distinct languages, can usually communicate in their native
tongues with little difficulty. And Turkish language soap operas,
broadcast without dubbing or subtitles, are some of the most popular
shows in Azeri-speaking Azerbaijan. So, when is a form of speech considered
a dialect versus a language? It seems reasonable that the degree
of mutual intelligibility would determine whether two ways of speaking are
classified as separate languages or as dialects of the same language. But as we've seen, there are many
occasions where this is not the case. Perhaps surprisingly, the distinction
between a language and a dialect usually has nothing to do
with pronunciation, vocabulary, or any other linguistic features. However, it's not
coincidental, either. It's a matter of politics. The basis for what's officially deemed
a language was shaped by the emergence of a European
nation states beginning around the 1500s. In order to establish and maintain
centralized governments, clear territorial boundaries,
and state-sponsored education systems, many nation states promoted
a standardized language. Which form of speech was chosen
to be the standard language was usually based on what people spoke
in the capital. And while other forms of speech persisted,
they were often treated as inferior. This tradition extended across the globe
with European colonization and into modern times. Italy, for example, has at least 15
of what might be called regional dialects. One of them, the Florentine dialect, became known as Standard Italian when
the country politically unified in 1861. It was selected because legendary authors
like Dante and Machiavelli used it in their original works, And it came to represent an

image
of Italian national identity that some found particularly desirable. Later on, in his attempt to establish
a unified, fascist state, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini
saw language standardization as an important objective. His government promoted standard Italian
while prohibiting other forms of speech from the public sphere, framing them as backward
and unsophisticated. In everything from job applications
to court testimonies, standard languages act as gatekeepers
around the world. For instance, one 1999 study showed that
landlords responded to apartment inquiries based on what form of speech
their prospective tenants used. When callers spoke African-American
Vernacular English, or AAVE, landlords were more likely
to reject their inquiries. When they spoke so-called
Standard American English, which is often associated with whiteness, landlords
responded more positively. Both of these forms of speech are
considered English dialects. In the United States,
some people have cast AAVE as an incorrect or simplified version
of mainstream US English. But AAVE follows consistent
grammatical rules every bit as sophisticated
as other forms of English. Linguists tend to avoid
the term dialect altogether. Instead, many opt to call different forms
of speech “varieties.” This way, languages are seen
as groups of varieties. So the English language
is made up of varieties including Standard British
and American English, AAVE, Nigerian English, Malaysian English,
and many others. Each has its own unique history
and characteristic pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical structures. But the dividing line
between varieties is murky. Human language, in all its
cross-pollinating, ever-evolving glory, naturally resists the impulse
to sort it into neat buckets. Oftentimes, forms of speech exist
on a kind of linguistic continuum where they overlap with others, and the differences between them
are gradual— not clear cut. And that’s the confounding

beauty of the dynamic, diverse, and dazzling universe of human communication.