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A Hydro-Koine Along the Grand Canal: Phonological, Lexical, and Syntactic Intersections in Early Mandarin Dialects, 1415–1901

Abstract

This paper lays out an initial framework for our project exploring the history of Mandarin between Nánjīng and Běijīng along China's Grand Canal. Stretching 1,776 km between Běijīng and Hángzhōu, the Grand Canal was the world's longest artificial waterway, sustaining over 126 million people by 1820 through the tribute-grain system (*cáoyùn*). Our research examines the canal as a kind of "hydro-koine" corridor where sustained contact between Běijīng and Jiāng-Huái Mandarin drove directional linguistic convergence (koineization) from 1415 to 1901 within a complex sociolinguistic milieu of competing forms.

We are mapping three types of isoglosses across the canal-linked dialect zones of Běijīng, Jì-Lǔ, Jiāo-Liáo and Jiāng-Huái Mandarin:

- **Phonology**: We seek to trace the diffusion of the northern, non-nasal and rhotacized suffix (*-ér*) as it competes with an off-canal *-zǐ* suffix that has more southern roots along the waterway axis, adapting Simmons's (2026) node-to-node diffusion model.
- **Lexicon**: We pursue the canal-city advance of transport and provisioning terms alongside classic north-south alternations, such as *kuàizi* vs. *zhù* ('chopsticks') and *zuó-* vs. *yè-* ('yesterday').
- **Syntax**: We analyze reciprocal, interactive influences that shaped Modern Standard Chinese, focusing on the diffusion trajectories of grammatical elements such as the passive marker *gěi* and the interrogative *shénme*.

Our goal is to assess whether or not isogloss permeability is level-dependent (**lexicon > phonology > syntax**) and test a conjecture that waterway connectivity, rather than mere geographic proximity, was the primary driver of dialect convergence between Nánjīng and Běijīng from the early Míng into the late Qīng. Finally, we observe how the canal's decline from 1826 to its decommissioning in 1901 closely paralleled the downturn in prestige of Nanjing-based Mandarin, as the historical north-south trade route fell into disuse. This discussion will present preliminary findings in the above outlined areas of focus.

References

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