



RECOGNITION
 OF
 LANGUAGES

by
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THE RECOGNITION OF LANGUAGES

About the author. Dr. Richard E. Wood is currently living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana where he is a professor of European languages at the Louisiana State University. Dr. Wood has been a member of North American Short Wave Association for many years and his outstanding works have been of significant importance to the membership. Dr. Wood authored the informative "Short Wave Voices of the World", available through GILFER Associates. This particular treatise on the recognition of languages is invaluable to the serious DXer who hopes to increase his knowledge of languages and totals of QSLs received.

The importance of the acquisition of an ability to correctly identify languages used in broadcasting should be evident to all DXers. There are many ways to acquire this ability, but they are all based on one factor, important in all aspects of DXing: Experience.

One of the easiest ways to learn is to listen to the VOA and BBC transmissions which announce in English prior to going into the foreign language. And, always be on the lookout for the characteristic words used in station identification, meaning "This is...", or "Here is...", or "Speaking," which will be listed in this article. These crucial words will be followed (occasionally preceded) by the station's name or location.

Spanish and Portuguese

This is the most important distinction which the DXer must be able to make, even under conditions of poor reception. Spanish has the five cardinal vowels, a, e, i, o, u, all spoken clearly, sharply, without nasalization or diphthong glide. There is no distinction of length. Although adjacent words do tend to coalesce ("sinalefa"), the overall impression is still of great clarity and precision. The endings -o, -a and -ion are typical. Castilian Spanish has the sound of English 'th' in cinco (thinko), cenar (thenar); and 'ly' in llamar (lyamar), where the Spanish of Latin America says 'sanko' and 'sonar'. In Argentina, Uruguay and Chile, ll and y are sounded as g in English "garage"; in more northerly areas, y as in "year" is normal. Argentine Spanish, influenced by Italian immigration, shows longer vowels and a greater musical range. In the colloquial Spanish of the Caribbean, final s is almost silent, e.g. "nohotroh somoh suwanoh" - "nosotros somos cubanos," but such non-standard Spanish is seldom heard from radio announcers, though often in interviews and talks. Portuguese has a totally different vowel system, with many nasalized sounds. Compare São Paulo and San Pablo. Final -a is sounded e (in Portugal), final -o as u; typical endings are nasalized eõ, in and em. Among characteristic consonants are the English sh, zh, and (in some dialects of Brazil) ch (from Spanish t) and j (Spanish d). Many Brazilian dialects have a very monotonous, sing-song intonation; while in Portugal, stressed vowels alone are clearly pronounced, the unstressed being slurred and hardly heard. Brazilian Portuguese sounds generally clearer (but hardly more like Spanish), with final -s in plurals; while Lisbon Portuguese has -sh, -zh, etc., and it is difficult to distinguish individual words. Identification words: Spanish - "Aquí" (Aki); Portuguese (in Portugal) pronounced Eki, meaning "here". In Spanish "transmite" while in Portuguese pronounced "transmichi". In Spanish, "esta es" (this is); in Portuguese, "fala" (Port. almost "fele")

French, Creole, Italian, Rumanian, Papiamentu

Everyone should be able to recognize French without difficulty. Canadian French may be recognized by its trilled r (the r of Spanish also), rather than the Parisian uvular (throaty) r, and by the coalescence of certain vowel sounds; however, the distinctions cannot be clearly described in a non-technical article. Haitian Creole sounds like French spoken by an African; watch for missing final -r, e.g., French lumière; Creole lumié; and for the definite articles (corresponding to French le and la) coming after, rather than before their nouns. Italian may easily be distinguished from Spanish by its characteristically singing intonation, and its longer stressed vowels; and especially by the double consonants, e.g., bel-la, gem-ma, which it shares, in Europe, only with Swedish and Finnish. Announcements begin "Qui" or "Transmette". Rumanian sounds quite like Italian, but includes many Slavic words, and has postpositd definite articles, e.g., -leu, -lion; leul - the lion. Watch for endings such as -ul, -u, -ui, -lui, -ilor, etc. Identification words: "Aici" ("ayich"). Papiamentu sounds like Spanish spoken by a person of mixed African, Dutch and Portuguese origin, and includes elements of these backgrounds. Identification words, "Aki ta" (stress on aki, not aki as in Spanish.)

Arabic, Hebrew, Somali, Kabyl

Arabic is of extreme importance in DXing; so much so, that one should be able to distinguish between at least three type of Arabic. Arabic is a chain of loosely connected dialects, and varies also with the literary or colloquial nature of the language in use. Egyptian and Sudanese Arabic is totally unlike the others in one important respect: the sound of g (English "game") is heard in Gamal, gumhuriya (republic), etc., whereas in Iraqi, Arabian, Libyan, and other non-Egyptian dialects, the g of the English "gem" is noted. In former French possessions, e.g., Algeria and Morocco, the sound of "garage" is used. Watch for the rather unattractive, breathy quality of Algerian Arabic, and many French borrowings. The Arabic of Algeria was so altered during the French years that, at independence, Radio Algiers actually had to hire Egyptian announcers. Kabyl and other Berber languages are also very breathy, full of glottal stops and guttural sounds, and today full of Arabic borrowings; but still easy to distinguish from Arabic. Typical Arabic announcements are: "Huna", "Hadha", and "Hadihi."

Somali is also full of Arabic borrowings, but is more musical, though still a harsh, breathy language. Identification: "Halkani was". Hebrew shows "sh" where Arabic has "s", e.g. shalom, vs. Arabic salaam. Almost all Hebrew words are stressed on the ending; the language is spoken with precision. Watch for the definite article, ha-, vs. Arabic al- or el-. Identification is usually "Kol" (voice).

Persian, Armenian usually have stressed endings, and are full of very long "ah" and "oh" vowels. They are full of Arabic borrowings, but are not Semitic languages. In Armenian, Turkish and other non-Arabic loans dominate. Identification: Persian, "Inja" (pronounced injaw); Armenian, "Khosume."

Turkish, Turkic languages show vowel harmony; typical words are "atalar" (fathers), and "eveler" (houses). The vowels ü and ü are unknown in Arabic or Persian, but are frequent in Turkish, e.g. Türkiye. In Turkish, very little stress will seem to fall on any syllable; the language is lightly spoken. In the Turkic languages of Central Asia (Turkmen, Kazakh, Uzbek, Tatar, Azerbaijani) stress falls usually on the last syllable and there is a harsher sound. Watch for the Russian borrowings in all those spoken on Soviet territory. Identification words: "Eürasi;" Azerbaijani, "Danishir'" and in general, in Central Asia, four or five syllable words are not uncommon.

African Languages

The Bantu languages all show certain typical consonant combinations: mb, nj, bw, ny and similar clusters are typical. The vowels are pure, with few diphthongs: a, e, i, o, u. M and n can stand on their own as syllables, e.g. Nsuka, Mwanza. Swahili (Kiswahili) is by far the most important. It sounds like a typical Bantu language, but many of the words used on radio newscasts, e.g., jamhuri "(republic), sauti (voice), habari (news). Note how the Arabic akhbar, with its consonant cluster and guttural sound becomes the rhythmic, melodic Swahili habari. Swahili for Mr. is bwana, and this word, along with the greeting jambe may be heard in record request programs. Identification is given in British-influenced countries as "Hii ni" (This is), e.g., in Tanzania, Kenya; but in the French-influenced Congo, Rwanda, etc., you may also hear "Hapa" (here, French 'ici'). Here, as in distinguishing between Thai and Lao, Malay and Indonesian, you can distinguish between different countries by picking out the foreign words they use in their otherwise identical or similar languages. Thus, a Swahili newscast from Tanzania will give country names in their English form, a broadcaster from the Congo will use French country names. Hausa is the second most important African language. Here again there is strong Arabic influence. The great difference between Hausa and Swahili and most other African tongues is that Hausa is a tone language, i.e., it varies in tone like Chinese. Again, Hausa is spoken in former British and French colonies, so foreign borrowings differ. Afrikaans in South Africa is descended from Dutch, which it closely resembles.

Pacific Languages

The Polynesian languages have fewer different sounds than any others. They tend to have the five cardinal vowels, a, e, i, o, u, and then only about seven or eight consonants, mainly h, k, l (or r), m and n. Typical words are Nuuanu, Kamehameha, Niuafu'ou, Wahine, etc. They are very rhythmic, flowing languages with the simplest and softest sounds. Often a vowel is repeated twice or even many times in a word, e.g., Moilili. These languages include Tahitian, Hawaiian, Maori, but not Fijian, which is a Melanesian language, nor Trukese, Marshallese, etc., Micronesian languages. Pidgin English, used in New Guinea and other areas, may best be illustrated by the ID of Radio Rabaul. It is "Yupela wok lang harim stesin bilong yumi." Or, in English, literally, "You-fellow walk along hearing station belong you-me." Freely translated, "You (plural) are listening to our station." So, when you hear a language that sounds like English, and yet isn't, it is Pidgin "yupela wok lang harim."

Indian, Eskimo Languages

There are hundreds of Indian languages, but those most often heard on the radio are QUECHUA, GUARANI' and AYMARA'. Do not mistake these for Armenian, Turkish, Mongolian, etc., to which they do bear a superficial resemblance! Like many Central Asian languages, they are often stressed on the end vowel (c.f., the names Guarani' and Aymara'). They have words of several syllables, often four or five. Often, they do not have five vowels, but only three, e.g., Quechua, which traditionally had only three (a, e, & u), but no i or o until hundreds of Spanish words began to be borrowed. Cf. Quechua, Kusku, Spanish Cuzco, the ancient Indian city in the Andes. It is this Spanish borrowing which will help you to identify the Indian languages. During Radio Moscow's Guarani' news, for instance, about one word in four is Spanish, all place-names, political terms, etc. ESKIMO, including GREENLANDIC, has lots of k and q sounds, and long words, e.g., Angmagsalik, Untutusk. The combinations ng and nt are typical. Eskimo in Canada has borrowed the English numbers from two on upwards, while in Greenland, Danish words are used.

Far Eastern Languages

These consist of tonal and non-tonal languages. In identifying an unknown tongue, first ask yourself, is it tonal? If so, it must be CHINESE (any dialect), VIETNAMESE, THAI (including LAO), CAMBODIAN or BURMESE. If tones do not seem to play a significant part in it, yet it appears to be an East Asian language, it will be JAPANESE, KOREAN, TAGALOG (Philippine Islands), or MALAYO-INDONESIAN. Japanese is unmistakable. All words end in a vowel or else in n. Vowels are short or long, e.g. long in Hōsō (radio), short in Nippon (Japan). Many words have four syllables, e.g., arigato (thank you). Station identification is usually "Kochirawa.... Hoso desu" (this is Radio....) and the final u is barely heard. Korean has a breathy sound, especially the consonants. Tagalog and other Filipino dialects are easy to identify. They sound like Indonesian, but have lots of Spanish words in them. Whole phrases, including numbers, price lists, etc., may be in Spanish. The exclamation, bueno (good) is often used. Malay and Indonesian are basically the same language. They have a, e, i, o, u, plus a short e, as in Penang. Typical is the sound ng. Mr. is saudara, and the plural is saudara-saudara, written saudara2. All words are repeated in the plural. So, if you hear constant repetition of words, it is one of the languages you are hearing. Station identification is "disini" or "inilah". Here is a typical announcement: "Saudara2 penengar, inilah Studio Radio Republik Indonesia di Ambon." It is translated as, "Ladies and gentlemen, (listeners), this is the R.R.I. studio in Ambon." It is an extremely clear language, and the average listener ought to be able to take not a bad report on an Indonesian broadcast, which he could not hope to do for one in Chinese, for instance.

Malay may be distinguished from Indonesian by the English borrowings and the overall British sound of the speakers, while Indonesians tend to sound like Dutchmen. The tone languages are the most foreign sounding to westerners. In Chinese, dialects may be distinguished by counting the tones. Cantonese shows a much wider range of tones than Standard Chinese (Mandarin or Kuoyu). The southerly dialects sound softer, less strident than the rather harsh, precise Standard. Experience is the only teacher in this difficult field. Vietnamese may only be recognized after practice and experience with the others. But, watch for the announcement, "Dai la Tieng noi...." (This is Radio....). In Thai, the word to watch for is "Thini Stani...." (This is station...). Thai sounds much softer than Vietnamese, and slower, too. Lao is a dialect of Thai using french words, where Thai uses English. (e.g., Thai will say "America" while Lao says "Amerique"). CAMBODIAN and BURMESE both sound rather like Thai, but superficially appear to be less tonal and to have longer, more clearly distinguished words of the Western type. None of the tonal languages have strong, trilled r sounds, preferring l; Japanese, on the other hand, has only r and no l; while Korean, both sounds are heard, but not distinguished. In Indonesian, r is strongly sounded.
