What is the difference between a language and a dialect? Ensure you make reference to Bell's language criteria in your answer.

Most people have in their minds an idea of what 'language' and 'dialect' mean, and how they differ - the notion that dialects are mutually intelligible, and languages are not. Unfortunately this idea does not work all of the time, and sociolinguists have tried to find other ways of making a distinction between the two. This essay will look at some of the theories and methods, and then make reference to Bell's language criteria to see if there is any way to draw a clear distinction between the two.

From a layperson's point of view, there are several notions pertaining to languages and dialects. The first being that a language is bigger - i.e. has a larger population of speakers, and is spread over a wider area than a dialect (which is considered to be regional). Another such notion is that dialects are subsets of language, or that a language is generally believed to be the 'standard' or 'correct' form and that a dialect is somehow inferior. (McPeek, 2011) The most widely accepted idea, however, is that of 'mutual intelligibility' - that is to say, that if two speakers of different varieties can understand one another, then they are speaking different dialects of the same language; and if two speakers of different varieties can not understand one another, then they are speaking different languages. It is interesting to note that, for the majority of cases, this distinction works - someone who speaks Standard English will be able to understand someone who speaks in the Yorkshire variation, but will not be able to understand someone who speaks Welsh. (Crystal, 2010, p.25) However there are cases that do not fit with this criterion. For example, there are languages recognised or accepted as different, such as Norwegian and Swedish, but which are in fact mutually intelligible. (Chambers, 1998, p.4-5) It is clear then that the distinction being made between dialect and language is not clear-cut. Crystal (2007, p.291) explains that there is often a chain of mutually intelligible dialects spread across an area. This is known as the 'geographical dialect continuum', and reveals that speakers of different dialects who are situated next to one another on the chain can understand one another, but those at either end cannot. It is difficult to assess at what point along the chain a dialect ends and a language begins. The distinction between languages is usually made because of socio-political reasons. (Crystal, 2010, p.25; Mesthrie, 2009, p.43)
It could be argued then, that the only true distinction that can be made between language and dialect is not a linguistic one at all, but rather a political one. Max Weinreich (a Russian-born linguist) once said that 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy', and what he meant by this was that all languages are in fact dialects, but some of these dialects are given prestige by the government through the motivation to create political unity and identity. (Crystal, 2010, p.25; Fromkin et al, 2013, p.279; McPeek, 2011) For example, Norway and Sweden have their own official languages in order to cement their political identities, but linguistically their languages could be considered as mutually intelligible dialects. In 1589 George Puttenham (as cited by Haugen, 1966, p.925) wrote 'after a speech is fully fashioned to the common understanding, and accepted by consent of a whole country and nation, it is called a language'. Also, in France during the 18th century, dialects were banned in order to create a sense of national loyalty; and, in China there is a great conscious effort being made by the government to create political unity by declaring Mandarin the 'standard', and all other varieties as 'dialects' of Mandarin despite there being no linguistic similarities. It has, therefore, long been recognised that language and political identity are closely linked. (Haugen, 1966, p.928; McPeek, 2011; Crystal, 2010, p.294-295)

The majority of nations have created a 'standard' language that all other dialects are subsets of. Haugen (1966, p.933) proposes that there are four stages crucial to the development from dialect to language: '(1) selection of norm, (2) codification of form, (3) elaboration of function, and (4) acceptance by the community.' The first stage - selection of norm - is where the dominant dialect, usually spoken by the elite, wealthy, and educated, becomes accepted as the standard. This has implications for speakers of other dialects who may have to adapt their variety for reasons of social mobility. The second stage - the codification of form - is vital to reinforcing the selected standard. The production of dictionaries and prescriptive grammar textbooks has led to the idea of 'correct' and 'incorrect' language, with the standard form being seen as superior (Fromkin, 2013, p.289). The third stage - elaboration of function - allows universal usage of the standard, by ensuring that it meets the needs of all sections of society, which is something a dialect cannot do. Haugen (1966, p.931-932) refers to the role of the written word in enabling the language to meet every need:

Writing, which provides for the virtually unlimited storage and distribution of vocabulary,
is the technological device enabling a modern standard language to meet the needs of every specialty devised by its users. There are no limits to the elaboration of language except those set by the ingenuity of man.

The fourth stage - acceptance by the community - is where the standard variety chosen by the elite, has been accepted by all as the norm. Standardisation is the first feature that Bell talks about within his language criteria.

One way in which sociolinguists try to make a distinction between language and dialect is by analysing the typologies of a language. Bell (1976, p.145-163) formulated a selection of criteria to help classify language types. The criteria are as follows: 'Standardisation' - the agreed and accepted codification of a particular variety; 'Vitality' - a living community of speakers; 'Historicity' - the development of a language used by particular social or ethnic groups which, over time, creates a sense of identity; 'Autonomy' - a perception that a language is unique; 'Reduction' - a sub-variety using a more simple grammar structure and vocabulary; 'Mixture' - borrowing between languages; and 'De facto norms' - norms accepted by the community of speakers but not necessarily codified. By using these, we can identify which criteria are present in a language, and which are present in a dialect. Bell states that Standardisation, Vitality, Historicity, Autonomy, and De facto norms are all key features of languages, with Mixture being present in some and not others. He then goes on to show that dialects appear to only feature Vitality and De facto norms. It is clear therefore, according to his language criteria, that there is a significant difference between language and dialect. However the choices made by Bell as to which criteria feature in a dialect could be challenged - many dialects have developed over time within ethnic or social groups who derive a sense of identity from their dialect, so could meet the criteria of Historicity. Mixture also seems entirely plausible as a feature present in dialects. Crystal (2007, p.293) refers to the mixing of dialects:

These days, Dialect identification has become much more difficult, mainly because of increased social mobility. In many countries, it is less common for people to live their whole lives in one place, and 'mixed' dialects are more the norm. Also, as towns and cities grow, once-distinct communities merge, with a consequent blurring of speech patterns.

So this shows that changing patterns in the use of languages and dialects affects our ability to distinguish between the two.
In conclusion, there have been many attempts made to try and find a clear distinction between a language and a dialect. Unfortunately it would seem that no matter how close some of these methods have come to differentiate between the two, there are always exceptions. Bell's idea of trying to identify the specific elements that a language and a dialect contain seems like a perfectly logical approach, however, it is difficult to do this because people will inevitably have their own subjective opinions as to which criteria fit with languages and dialects. It would seem that the only true distinction that can be made, therefore, is that all languages are, in fact, dialects; and that Max Weinreich's observation - 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy' - reveals that the only undisputed difference is a political, rather than a linguistic one.
**List of Resources**


