

Do the limits of my language mean the borders of my world?

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**Dpt. of Theoretical
and Applied Linguistics**

ReCoS
thinking comparative syntax



European Research Council
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Preliminaries

What I won't talk about

- Wittgenstein
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis/linguistic relativity

What I will only mention briefly

My (usual) research background:

- syntax – the structure of sentences
- morphology – the structure of words

ReCoS

Rethinking Comparative Syntax



- structural differences between the world's languages
- aims at accounting for the range and limits of variation in a principled way

What I want to talk about

- language
- national language
- dialect

Aims

- What is (a) language?
- some notes on nationalism
- problematise the one nation-one language bias
- socio-political dimension of everyday notion of “language”

Let's get started!

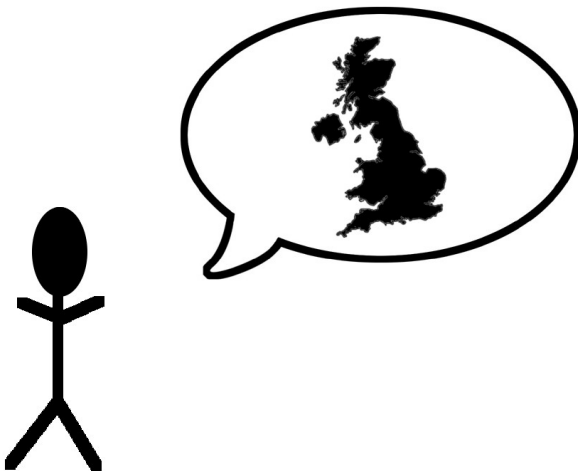
What is happening here?



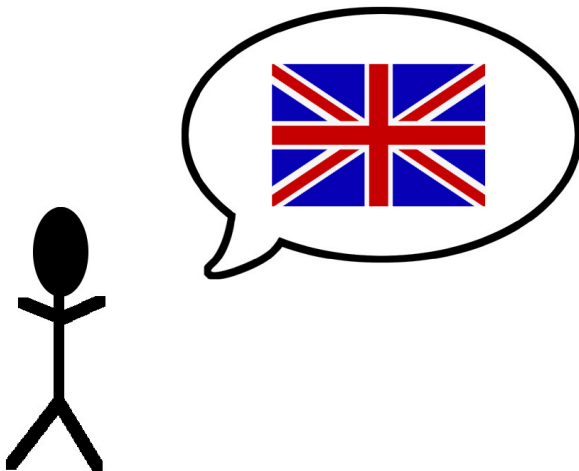
Relating flags to languages is common

excerpt from *Les Douze Travaux d'Astérix* (Goscinny, Uderzo & Watrin 1976)

What's this?



Potentially similar to this?



Outline

1 “Imagined Communities”

2 Conceptions of language

3 Some examples

4 Conclusion

The Age of Nationalism

roughly 18th ct. – today

Gellner (1983:1)

“Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent.”

Anderson (2006:5f.)

“In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an **imagined political community** – and imagined as both inherently **limited** and **sovereign**.”

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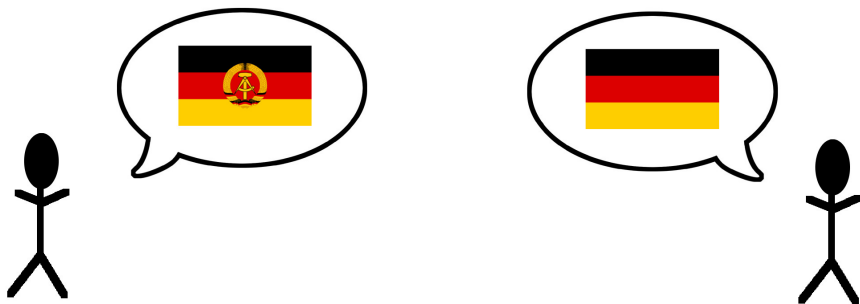
Ok, we know what's going on here...



Now what's going on?



One or two?



- views varied within both states 1949–1990
- “two states, one nation” (East) vs. “Exclusive mandate” (West) both stressed maintenance of one nation

Effective symbolism

Of flags and maps (a.o.)

- remember the map
- Anderson points out the significance of maps (a.o.) for the emergent nationalisms in colonial SE Asia
- plausibly also important in the maintenance of national conscience in “stable” nations

Billig (1995:8): *Banal Nationalism*

“In so many little ways, the citizenry are daily reminded of their national place in a world of nations. However, this reminding is so familiar, so continual, that it is not consciously registered as reminding. The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building.”

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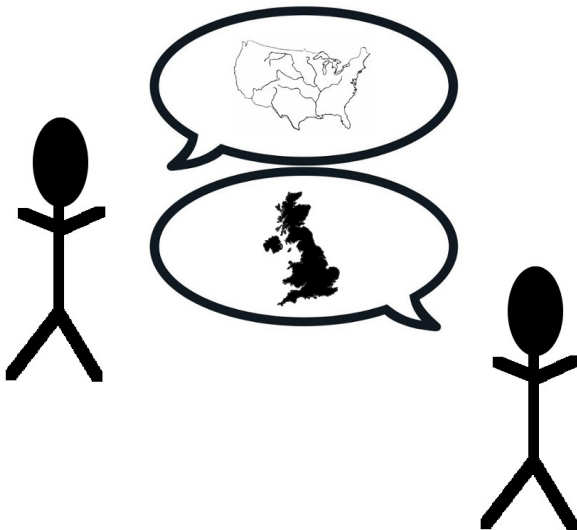
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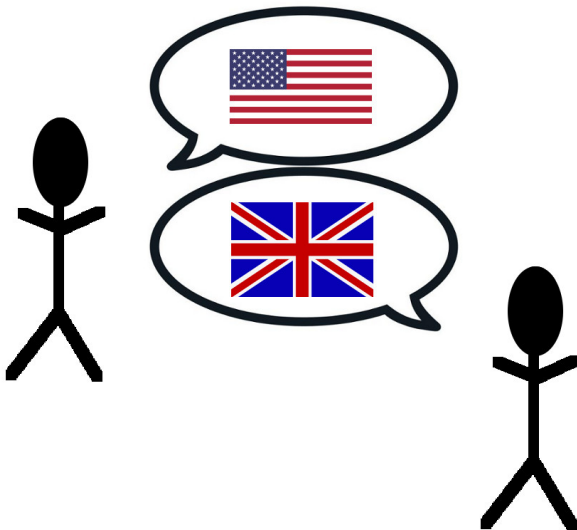
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Another example



One English, two English, many English...?



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What is a language?

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“A shprakh iz a dialekt mit an armey un flot.”

A language is a dialect with an army and a fleet.

Max Weinreich reporting an auditor

What is a language?

Chomsky (1986:15)

“[...] the commonplace notion of language has **a crucial sociopolitical dimension**. We speak of Chinese as “a language,” although the various “Chinese dialects” are as diverse as the several Romance languages. We speak of Dutch and German as two separate languages, although some dialects of German are very close to dialects that we call “Dutch” and are not mutually intelligible with others that we call “German.” A standard remark in introductory linguistics courses is that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy (attributed to Max Weinreich). That any coherent account can be given of “language” in this sense is doubtful; surely, none has been offered or even seriously attempted. Rather, all scientific approaches have simply **abandoned these elements of what is called “language” in common usage.**”

What is language?

Different concepts

What is language?

Different concepts

Ferdinand de Saussure (*Course in General Linguistics*)

langage the faculty of language

langue the abstract rules and conventions of a signifying system

parole concrete instances of use of *langue* (actual speech)

Chomsky (1986)

E-language externalised; “a collection (or system) of actions and behaviours of some sort” (p. 20); includes Saussure’s *parole* and *langue*; independent of properties of the minds of speakers

I-language internalised; the mental state of a competent speaker; “some element of the mind of the person who knows the language, acquired by the learner, and used by the speaker-hearer” (p. 22)

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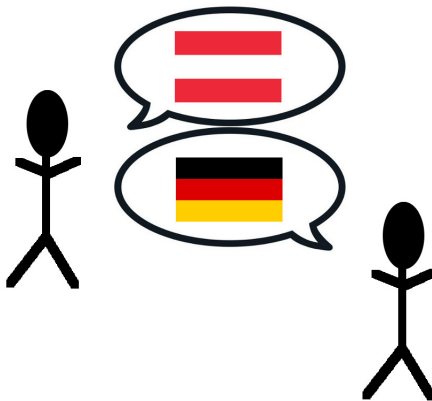
What is English?

Atkinson (1992:23)

“What, then, are we to make of the claim that someone is a **speaker of English**? This now becomes a sociopolitical assertion which could be recast as follows: the person in question has an internal system of representation (an I-language), the overt products of which (utterance production and interpretation, grammaticality judgements), in conjunction with other mental capacities, are such that that person **is judged (by those deemed capable of judging)** to be a speaker of English. ”

Mutual intelligibility as a rule-of-thumb

- language vs. dialect
- but cf. *varieties* for “pluricentric” languages



- talking about languages involves abstraction
- potential loss of detail
- averages over grammars of speakers who understand each other to some degree may be called “a language”, a dialect, a variety
- NB: mapping of partial dialectal continua onto “language” units somewhat arbitrary

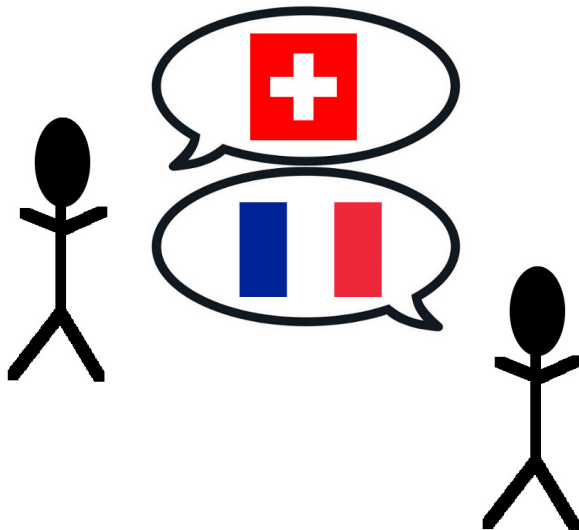
Roberts (1997:5)

“[...] whenever we use the terms ‘English’, ‘English speaker’, etc., we should bear in mind that **these are terms with no import for linguistic theory**. What we’re really talking about are the mental states of people who are conventionally referred to as ‘English speakers’, etc. The term ‘English’, if it really refers to anything, refers to an E-language.”

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Multiple national languages





Languages with a nation but not a state



It doesn't always take an army

to make a language

- note that standardisation induces hierarchy
- standard, Batua Basque vs. host of “dialects”

“Greek”

Standard Modern Greek and Cypriot Greek



“German”

Bavarian and non-Bavarian



Former Yugoslavia



- Serbocroatian, Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian (BCMS) or Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin and Serbian?

Former Yugoslavia

A footnote on a talk using the term “Serbocroatian”:

*“The local members of the MMM Scientific and Organising Committees consider the use of the term ‘Serbo-Croatian’, or any other alternative expression like ‘neostokavian’, to be rather an **ideologically motivated anachronic declaration** than an objective consideration in the research of synchronical linguistic phenomena in Serbian and Croatian languages. The appearance of the term Serbo-Croatian originates from the 19th century classification of Slavic languages despite the fact that Croatian and Serbian languages and literatures existed and developed since late middle-ages as and in separate languages. Regardless of this idea of convergence, both languages were officially used and spoken continuously. [...] Two languages are **separately registered** in international registers including ISO 639-2/RA codes for languages (srp and hrv).”*

cf. http://mmm9.ffzg.unizg.hr/?page_id=10

Former Yugoslavia

TLN Language Lessons

`http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1YxWq11Gao`

Do you have a flag?

Minority languages without national aspirations



- one of numerous examples:
Aromanian/Vlach
- Romance language (related to Latin)
- most speakers (on Greek territory)
self-identify as Greek

(1) I voski ftiaksane psomi.
the sheperds made.3PL bread
'The sheperds baked bread.'

[Modern Greek]

(2) Pikurar-li adrere pini.
sheperds-the.PL baked.3PL bread
'The sheperds baked bread.'

[Aromanian]

A Greek case study from the Caucasus

based on current project of Stavros Skopeteas, Konstanze Jungbluth, Concha Höfler et al.

- multilingual communities self-identifying as Greek in Georgia
- natively most speak Russian and/or Georgian, Pontic Greek or Urum; a few learn Modern Greek (not native)
- Pontic Greek: variety of Greek
- Urum (from Turkish word for ‘Romans’, i.e. Byzantines): a language closely related to Turkish
- speakers of either language seem to identify as Greek or Georgian in different contexts
- orthodox religion as factor of identification

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- very incomplete overview (no mention of historical projection, “Old English/German” etc.)

Main points:

- “language” as a subject of linguistic inquiry \neq commonplace notion
- commonplace notion is subject to (the result of) sociopolitical influences

Billig (1995:10)

“[...] **national languages also have to be imagined**, and this lies at the root of today’s common-sense belief that discrete languages ‘naturally’ exist. It might seem obvious that there are different spoken languages; but, **this assumption itself is an ideological notion**, which has been vital for the achievement of order and hegemony in modern nation-states. The assumption that different languages ‘naturally’ exist illustrates just how deeply nationalist conceptions have seeped into contemporary common sense.”



Acknowledgements

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All misinterpretations and mistakes are my own responsibility.

- Anderson, Benedict (2006). *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso. Revised edition. First edition 1983 by Verso.
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Some other events at the Festival of Ideas

On linguistics

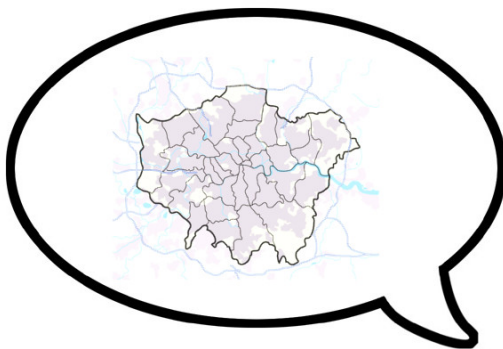
- NOW! 1–3 pm, here
Linquiztics – linguistics quizzes by ReCoS
- today, 3–4 pm, here
Prof. Ian Roberts **“Ideas and languages: 10 languages that changed the world”**
- Sunday, 27 October, 1.30–2.30 pm, Alison Richard Building, room SG1
Dr. Jenneke van der Wal and András Bárány: **“Frontiers of linguistic fieldwork”** – interactive workshop
- Saturday, 2 November, 2–4.30 pm, English Faculty
Cambride Bilingualism Network (pre-booking)

On borders and nationalism

- Saturday, 2 November, 3–5 pm, Lady Mitchell Hall
Border crossings: in the light of history (pre-booking)















- 1920s: Kurds – “Turanian” tribe that forgot its language (Cemiloglu 2009)

Eddie Izzard

Dress to Kill