Words in Space and Time

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The “genetic” (Stammbaum-style) classification of languages (Einzelsprachen) has been preferred by scholars and nationalists alike since the mid-nineteenth century because it allows for the allocation of distinctive languages to ethnonationally and politically defined nations (groups of people). Einzelsprachen are imagined as self-contained entities, completely separate from one another. This radical discontinuity, at the conceptual level, can be easily translated into territorial discontinuity, or into a state frontier. In a quantum leap of ideologized thinking about the linguistic, the non-territorial character of a language is territorialized into the boundaries of an ethnonational nation-state, in accordance with ethnonationalism’s principle of the normative isomorphism of language, nation, and state: Language = Nation = State. The modern-style statehood underpinned with the norm of (Westphalian) sovereignty does not allow for overlapping territories or jurisdictions in the case of nation-states recognized as independent and sovereign (“normal”). Hence, multilingualism and polyglossia are seen as an “aberration” from the perspective of ethnonational nationalism, since these phenomena are a form of social and spatial overlapping of languages, which blurs any sharp divisions among them.

The concept of dialect continuum makes it possible to depict the typical gradual change in language use across a territory where speech varieties (dialects, languages) employed belong to the same language family. In this way, the ideologized sharpness of genetic classification is somewhat contained, though radical separateness is still imagined to exist at the meeting point (or alongside the “language boundary”) between two dialect continua. In reality, multilingualism and polyglossia used to allow interlocutors from different dialect continua to communicate successfully. In Central Europe there was no tight, let alone impenetrable, language barriers (or language borders) until the rise of ethnonational nation-states. With their educational and political practices, these national polities have enforced monolingualism in the national language across their territorially defined nations (groups of people). Einzelsprachen belong to radically different language families (dialect continua) of West Romance and Germanic languages, respectively. This “Frenchification” of English (or a form of English-French amalgamation) is a legacy of intensive political, economic, and social interactions between Romancephone and Germanic-speaking members of the English ruling elite. The situation lasted for half a millennium while the English monarchs held vast territorial possessions in what is today France between the mid-eleventh and mid-sixteenth centuries. Initially, the exchange of linguistic elements was facilitated by the shared lingua franca of Western Christianity, Latin, and later by the use of (Norman, or Anglo-) French as the (leading) official language of the state institutions in the Kingdom of England, as late as the turn of the eighteenth century, in the case of courts of law. Afterward, the standardization and development of English as an Einzelsprache was conducted with the use of numerous French linguistic loans and through coining Latinate and French-like neologisms. What is more, Latin was adopted as the model for “regulating” English grammar in the process of the standardization of this language.

Similarly, the syntactical, morphological, and lexical convergence of the languages of the Balkan linguistic area is a function of the one to two millennium-long social, economic, political, and religious (cultural) interaction between Albanian-, Greek-, Romanian-, Romani-, and Turkic-speakers, first, within the boundaries of the (East) Roman Empire, and later in the Ottoman Empire. The Balkan languages slowly and gradually separated from one another with the rise of the Balkan nation-states, from Serbia and Greece in the early nineteenth century, Montenegro and Romania in the mid-nineteenth century, Bulgaria, Albania, Slovenia and Turkey at the turn of the twentieth century, Croatia and Macedonia in the mid-twentieth century, and to Bosnia and Kosovo at the turn of the twenty-first century. But this separation has not been complete and many shared linguistic elements remain, reinforced by the process of European integration and the spread of English as the lingua franca of present-day Europe.
There is no set standard or ideological precondition for how many common elements must be shared by languages and speech varieties to qualify as members of this or that linguistic area. This concept is more of a heuristic instrument that allows for researching the rarely acknowledged influence of long-lasting sociopolitical and economic structures and patterns on language convergence and divergence. In 1931, Trubetzkoy’s colleague and fellow Russian émigré, Roman Jakobson, proposed a Eurasian linguistic league, extending from Lisbon to Vladivostok, as underpinned by the empires of the Great Steppe, which beginning with the fourth century established a space of common communication extending from the Pacific Ocean to Europe. Between the thirteenth century and today, this space was maintained first by the Mongol Empire and its successor khanates, and afterward by the Russian Empire, which in the twentieth century morphed into the Soviet Union and its Soviet bloc. Similarly, in the south, the expansion of the Islamic Caliphate (and Islam as such) from Maghreb to India and Indonesia, between the seventh and eighteenth centuries, also contributed to the rise of this Eurasian linguistic league. In the high age of imperialism, the same routes were traced by English, Dutch, and Spanish colonialists, who extended their European rule over India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, respectively. These developments fortified the southern section of the Eurasian linguistic league (Jakobson 1931).

The proposition of a linguistic area for a region does not preclude the possibility of another linguistic league overlapping, intersecting with, or containing the former. Furthermore, one linguistic league may be a subsection of another. Scholars tracing linguistic commonalities between languages and speech varieties of a proposed linguistic league, in reality, probe into the palimpsest of human history of a given region. They peel a proverbial onion of history, whose different temporal skins may yield different linguistic leagues, which can be related or not, or may overlap or not.

In 1939, the United States autodidact linguist, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1941: 77–78), proposed the concept of Standard Average European (SAE) for covering the Indo-European languages of Europe, but mainly the Germanic ones (as led by the imperial Einzelsprachen of English and German) and the Romance ones (as led by the imperial Einzelsprachen of French and Spanish). In a way, he traced the Judeo-Christian commonalities of Western Christianity as underpinned by the use of Latin as the area’s sole and then leading lingua franca well into the early modern period. Afterward, these commonalities were reinforced by industrialization, the intensification of economic exchanges and the imperial competition between Western Europe’s imperial metropolises. In Whorf’s and his followers’ opinion Slavic, East Romance or North Germanic (Scandinavian) languages are peripheral to SAE, hence in terms of a linguistic area, SAE is limited to Western Europe.

The Hungarian linguist and historian, Gyula Décsy, had to leave his country in the wake of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, crushed by the Soviet intervention. He settled in West Germany and switched to writing in German. In 1973 Décsy proposed a scheme of several linguistic areas for Central Europe. In his opinion, the Danubian linguistic area covers the non-Germanic languages and speech varieties of Austria-Hungary, including Montenegro and Serbia. However, the territorial extent of this linguistic area includes historical Hungary’s Saxon and Swabian dialects, which are Germanic in their character. The Rokytno linguistic area corresponds to the territory of Poland-Lithuania, which was erased from the political map of Europe in the late eighteenth century. While the name of the former linguistic area unambiguously refers to the Danube River, Décsy’s choice of “Rokytno” for dubbing the latter linguistic league is quite opaque to most Western readers. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth’s geographic center was occupied by the Priepet (or Polesie) Marshes, now split between western Belarus and western Ukraine, with their westernmost terminus reaching Poland. Several Belarusian and Ukrainian villages and towns bear the name of Rokytno (Rokytne, Rokitno, Rakitinaje, or Rakitnica), which refers to red-stemmed feathermoss (Pleurozium schreberi), known as rokieta (or rokietnik) in Polish, this linguistic area’s leading language. This plant is widespread across the Priepet Marshes, which due to its preponderance, sometimes used to be referred to as the Blota Rokitkica (Rokytno Marshes) in Polish. The Peipus linguistic area takes its name from Lake Peipus, now split by the Estonian-Russian frontier. This linguistic area gathers the Einzelsprachen of Estonian and Latvian, alongside their cognate regional languages of Latgalian and Võro, respectively. Historically speaking, the region’s type of Low German also belongs to this linguistic area, which coincides with the Livonian Order’s medieval and early modern monastic state. Later, this region changed hands between Poland-Lithuania and Sweden, while in the early eighteenth century it became an administratively and linguistically distinctive region of Russia, composed of the governorates of Courland, Estland, and Livonia. German remained the official language of administration and education for these governorates until the 1880s. Last but not least, in Décsy’s scheme of Central Europe’s linguistic areas, Scandinavia’s Germanic and Finno-Ugric languages are included in the Viking linguistic area with the self-explanatory name referring to the Norsemen (Vikings), who politically and militarily dominated this area beginning in the sixth century (Décsy 1973).

In the case of Crimea and the North Sea littoral, the Kama and Littoral linguistic areas have walk-on roles, respectively, on this map. In the former case, when reflecting on the convergence among speakers of Finno-Ugric and Turkic languages in the region of the middle Volga, in 1971, the Soviet linguist Boris A. Serebrennikov proposed a Volga-Kama linguistic area, its name sometimes shortened to the Kama linguistic area. The Kama River (Çulman in Tatar, Kam in Udmurt) is the longest left (Eastern) tributary of the Volga (İdel in Tatar). The Littoral linguistic area refers to the Northern Sea shores where the merchants of the Hanseatic League were active between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries. They employed Low German as their leading language of commerce and administration, now preserved in the form of standard Dutch (Flemish).