Linguistic Areas (*Sprachbünde*) in Central Europe: An Alternative Classification, c 1930

In Europe (or more broadly speaking, in Eurasia) the standard manner of classifying Einzelsprachen is the "genealogical language tree" (*Stammbaum*). Other less popular schemes frequently employed by linguists include the classificatory concepts of dialect continuum and linguistic area (*Sprachbund*). All are context specific, and none is universal, meaning that these classificatory approaches and systems were developed first in Europe for sorting Einzelsprachen, that is, languages constructed in line with the Judeo-Graeco-Romano-Christian-Islamic concept of Einzelsprache. This concept of a language (Einzelsprache) assumes that the speech of a country's ruling elite, usually residing in the capital, should be the (dialectal and sociolectal) basis for a planned (intended) Einzelsprache, which in practice is created by applying to it the technology of writing. Empires and modern states are possible thanks to widespread bureaucracy, which typically is conducted with the employment of a single official (national) language. In order to ensure that the bureaucratic system covers relevant issues in a similar and comparable manner across the entire territory of a polity, administrators and scribes need to stick to the same usages in order to avoid confusion, so that a document produced hundreds of kilometers away would be comprehensible to bureaucrats at the other end of this state. The main instruments of creating such uniformity of language use are a writing system with an orthographic norm, an authoritative grammar, and a state-approved dictionary. The adoption of a single writing system and standard methods of coding sounds (phonemes), syllables and words (morphemes) limits the initial spelling variety in this regard, which previously often made a text appear gibberish to a reader with no knowledge of a specific local orthographic system. The authoritative grammar ensures uniformity at the level of syntax (sentences), while the approved dictionary limits or expands the vocabulary, as suitable, and curbs semantic ambiguity by linking specific meanings to specific words and by cutting out redundant alternatives. This is, in essence, the process of standardizing and creating languages in line with the Western concept of Einzelsprache, as developed some two millennia ago in the Roman Empire. This is *not* a universal process or method of shaping languages, though many believe so due to the fact that in the course of the Western colonization of, and extending domination over the world, this model of linguistic engineering was imposed on the entire globe and is accepted as the norm to this day.

Neither of these language classificatory schemes, nor the model of language standardization (as they are known and practiced in the West, and nowadays across Eurasia) are universal. For instance, the application of these instruments to the linguistic in sub-Saharan Africa did not produce expected results known from Europe, or in other words, clear-cut "genealogical language trees," separate dialect continua, or unambiguous linguistic areas. First, Einzelsprachen created out of local speech by missionaries for the sole purpose of spreading Christianity were often rejected by the target groups. Many disliked this foreign imposition with no respect for the local ethnic and religious traditions. What is more, a given ethnic group's thinking on how the linguistic should be shaped and used typically differed radically from the Western (European) concept of Einzelsprache. Second, unless they had been previously in contact with Muslim or Christian traders (typically along the coast), sub-Saharan Africa's ethnic groups did not employ the technology of writing, which is of defining importance for the Einzelsprache. Typically, a small polity (a union of villages or extended family clans) equating an ethnic group could be successfully run by the proverbial "word of mouth." Speech varieties employed at local rulers' courts obviously held more prestige and projected more power than peripheral varieties or those employed by the lowest stratum of community (society). However, the populations of such small polities were equally tiny, counting thousands or tens of thousands individuals, so the social and actual difference between high status speech varieties (acrolects) and low status ones (basilects) was actually much smaller than the socio-communicative distance of this kind observed in Europe between the prescribed standard of an Einzelsprache (national language) and its "sub-standards dialects." Third, until the mid-twentieth century the usual imperialist's racist conviction was that people in sub-Saharan Africa had "no history." As a result, little effort has been invested in researching the history of this region's polities and communities. Hence, unlike in Europe, there are no props in the form of historical studies on multiple states, towns, and ethnic groups going back a millennium or more on which linguists could fall back, while thinking on sub-Saharan Africa's speech varieties (languages) and the relations between their speech communities. Although the fact is not fully acknowledged, such historical monographs do help linguists to rationalize about this type of connections across Eurasia, and assumptions made on their basis richly underpin "genealogical" classifications of languages. In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, any detailed overviews of history begin with European colonization in the mid-nineteenth century and are of little help to linguists, because they are mostly about Europeans extending...
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Map showing linguistic areas in Central Europe with different colors and labels for each area. The map includes names of provinces, autonomous entities, state capitals, and borders.
their dominion over Africans, rather than on the latter. Finally, the anatomically modern human with the biological (evolutionary) capacity for speech emerged in Africa about 200,000 years ago, meaning that the processes of human group building and splitting have unfolded on the continent for a period of the same length. At the level of language, it means that many more cycles of convergence and divergence have taken place among sub-Saharan Africa’s speech varieties (languages) than elsewhere in the world.

In this context, the classificatory instruments of the genealogical language tree, dialect continuum, or linguistic area are overly-simplistic and too context-specific, specifically geared toward and based on examples from Eurasia. Faced with this classificatory conundrum, in 1948, the British linguist Malcolm Guthrie came up with the concept of “geographical zone” for classifying over 500 (and still counting) Bantu languages (speech varieties), as spoken by 350 million people currently (2018). Guthrie’s sixteen zones are neutrally coded with the Latin alphabet’s successive letters from A through S. Interestingly, the inhabitants of today’s Central Europe also number over 300 million. One can assume that if nothing has been known about the region’s populations beyond the last century, they did not use the technology of writing and lived in small polities of several to some tens of thousands inhabitants, an outside observer would face exactly the same dilemma as Guthrie in sub-Saharan Africa, with half a thousand speech varieties connected to various ethnic groups (that is, ethnolect, languages) with no prop of political or textual history to classify them in a “genealogical” fashion. Even without such a far-fetched assumption, it is enough to imagine that Europe’s national or official languages were never created (or proclaimed), and the dialects that are now gathered under the former’s “umbrella” are “set free.” This would mean several hundreds of dialects (speech varieties, languages) and the necessity to establish the nature, dynamics, and history of the relations among their speech communities in order to come up with a working classification scheme. In the case of 500 such ethnic groups and their “languages” the potential number of interactions among them would amount to staggering 250,000.

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Map 23 presents an alternative classificatory scheme of Central Europe’s linguistic areas to that offered in Map 22. The political situation in both maps is the same, anchored in 1930. However, the historical entities underpinning the linguistic areas in Map 22 and the thinking on them date back to the turn of the twentieth century, while the thought and such underpinning entities in Map 23 date more to the postwar period, or more broadly, to the second half of the twentieth century. Although Benjamin Lee Whorf’s concept of ASE (Average Standard European) seems to keep wartime Allies together (including the defeated Germany and Austria, as jointly occupied by these Allies), Roman Jakobson’s Eurasian linguistic area eerily sketches out the Soviet Union’s seizure of Central Europe’s nation-states, then corralled into the Soviet bloc. The traditional Balkan and Danubian (Austro-Hungarian) linguistic areas remain almost unchanged, only with Macedonia decisively included in the former, instead being shared by both these linguistic areas. However, Turkey, following the 1923 mutual ethnic cleansing (“population exchange”) with Greece, is excluded from the Balkan linguistic area, and rather attached to the Central Asian (Altaic) linguistic area on account of Istanbul’s interwar and postwar attachment to the ideology of Pan-Turkism, which stresses the Central Asian origin of Turkic-speakers. Another difference between both maps is the disappearance of the Kama linguistic area in Crimea, from where, in 1944, the Soviet authorities expelled the Crimean Tatars to Central Asia.

Interestingly, while considering the northern section of Central Europe in the climate of renewed openness brought about by the end of communism and the breakup of the Soviet Union, at the turn of the twenty-first century, scholars proposed to see the Baltic Sea region as a common space of communication and interaction. In the second half of the first millennium Norwegians (Vikings) spanned this region, thanks to their economic and military pursuits, their crowning achievement being the founding of (Kyivan) Rus’ in the ninth century, a polity extending from the Baltic and White seas to the Black Sea. Afterward, Sweden and Denmark remained intimately involved in this region in constant competition with the Teutonic and Livonian orders that drew support and fresh knight recruits from the Holy Roman Empire. In the early modern period, the Hanseatic League ruled supreme in city ports dotting the Baltic littoral and the North Sea’s southern shores. Bound together in a contentious dynastic union, Poland-Lithuania and Sweden each strove to make the Baltic into their own “internal sea.” Sweden turned out to be more successful at executing this plan until the pan-Central European conflict of the Great Northern War (1700–1721), won by both contestants’ common enemy (and at times an ally), namely Muscovy. This victory overhauled Muscovy into a Russian Empire. After the partitions of Poland-Lithuania, the Baltic Sea was shared by Prussia, Russia, and Sweden with a small walk-on role reserved for Denmark. The political configuration survived until the Great War. Nowadays, the shores of the Baltic are shared by nine states, namely, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Sweden. Already during the Cold War, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden began closely cooperating. After the fall of communism, Estonia and Latvia joined them, with the aspiration to become “Nordic” states. Finally, beginning in 2004 all the Baltic states (with the exception of Russia, or rather its exclave of Kaliningrad) are members of the European Union. The Baltic area is again a space of common communication and interaction.

Hence, the possibility of a Circum-Baltic linguistic area is not so far-fetched as it might seem at first glance (Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2006). Remembering the past and consciously linking historical analysis with research on language helps with language classification and explains, from a longue durée perspective, a variety of interrelations extant among speech communities. A Baltic linguistic area is included on the map as a distinctive subsection of the Circum-Baltic linguistic area. The co-existence of Estonian- and Latvian-speakers in the same Livonian monastic polity-turned-administrative unit lasted for over 700 years, from the early thirteenth to the early twentieth century.