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CHAPTER 3 European languages 1998
ALEXANDER B. MURPHY

Introduction

Language is one of the most important and most basic features of human society. It is a principal means by which communities share and disseminate ideas and information, and it both reflects and shapes peoples' experiences with the world around them. As such, language is deeply implicated in the history and human geography of Europe. On its surface, learning about the geography of European languages might seem to be a straightforward matter. Everyone knows that a variety of languages are spoken in Europe, and understanding the nature, spatial character and significance of that variety is presumably what a geography of European languages is all about. Yet this assumes that we have a clear sense of what is meant by the term 'language' itself.

Unfortunately, there is no commonly accepted definition of language, or of what distinguishes a language from a dialect. Many dictionaries define language as a set of words and phrases that are understood by a substantial number of people. Yet how substantial does that community have to be? And what do we mean by understood? We commonly refer to German as a language, yet a 'German' speaker living in northern Germany might well be hard pressed to understand the 'German' spoken in a household situated in a small town in northern Switzerland. At the same time, we think of Norwegian and Danish as distinct languages even though a Dane could understand most of what was being said by someone speaking the form of Norwegian that prevails in Oslo.

There is no easy way to resolve such definitional ambiguities, but recognizing the problem draws attention to the fact that any map of languages embodies a subjective perspective on the meaning of the term language. It is sometimes said that a language is a dialect with an army behind it, and there is

a certain truth to this since the tongues that we commonly designate as languages are those that have achieved some international status as a consequence of the historical successes of particular peoples in political or economic spheres. This, in turn, is a nice way of illustrating one of the fundamental premises of this chapter: that language cannot be understood in isolation from place. To state the proposition more completely, language is a cultural construct that reflects the changing history and geography of the places where it develops.

A related, but somewhat different, point about language is that it is a dynamic phenomenon. The present configuration of European languages is nothing more than the latest expression of a cultural construct that is in constant flux, in terms of both its essential character and its spatial distribution. Languages evolve over time, changing in type, location, extent and even existence. They spread into new areas when people move, they acquire new characteristics when people are confronted with different circumstances or other people, and they can decline or even die out when speakers of a language find themselves in marginal social and political circumstances. As such, the evolving language pattern of a region through time can provide important clues into the history of population movement and interaction, as well as the power relations that govern interactions between peoples.

This chapter seeks to situate the evolving language pattern of Europe in the context of changing demographic, cultural and political arrangements and understandings. The goal is first to sketch some of the most significant influences on the evolution of the European linguistic map over the past several thousand years. The discussion will then turn to the relationship between language and politics in 19th and 20th century Europe. The chapter will show that language is not simply an objective cultural component of human communities living in particular

European languages

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Figure 1 is a map of the study area in the northern Adriatic. The map shows the coastline from Trieste in the north to Ancona in the south. The locations of the sampling stations are marked with numbers 1 through 10. The stations are distributed along the coast, with some in the open sea and others closer to the shore. The map also shows the major roads and the location of the port of Trieste.

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places; instead it can be an emotionally charged facet of peoples' identities that has significant political and social implications.

The emergence of the major European branches of Indo-European

Most modern European languages belong to a few major branches of one of the world's most important language families: Indo-European. There are great differences among the Indo-European languages of Europe, but they all share some basic structural characteristics, and even some continuities in vocabulary. It is difficult to know exactly where Indo-European tongues originated, but a combination of archeological and linguistic evidence suggests that the hearth area was in the vicinity of the Black Sea – very possibly near the Caucasus Mountains (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov, 1990; Renfrew, 1988). The emergence of the modern European language pattern can be traced to migrations of various peoples from this hearth to the west and north-west that began as early as 6000 BC. In the succeeding several millennia, certain peoples moved west across the Aegean Sea into what is now Greece, others moved north-west into west-central Europe and ultimately to the shores of the Atlantic, and yet others moved north into the Hungarian Plain and beyond.

As groups separated from one another, their languages began to diverge ever more in structure, syntax and vocabulary. Over time linguistic divergence became great enough that distinct branches of Indo-European emerged. These branches can be best understood when illustrated on a language tree (Figure 3.1) and represented on a map (Figure 3.2). The language branch of those peoples who crossed the Aegean Sea and settled in what is now Greece is Greek, also known as Hellenic. Peoples moving to the north-west ultimately split into three branches: a Celtic branch, composed of peoples of uncertain geographical origin who occupied a vast area north and west of the Pyrenees and Alps, but south of modern Denmark (see also Chapter 2); an Italic branch, which encompassed those who occupied the south-central part of the Italian peninsula; and a Germanic branch, which encompassed those who moved into modern Denmark and adjacent parts of Sweden. Those who moved to the Hungarian Plain and beyond split into two branches, a Baltic branch with

geographical roots in what is now western Poland, and a Slavic branch with probable geographical roots in the Hungarian Plain itself.

The Indo-European migrants encountered other peoples as they moved into new areas. Although the tongues of the migrants ultimately predominated in most places, this did not happen without some incorporation of words and phrases from pre-existing languages, which furthered the divergence between the different Indo-European branches (Jordan, 1996). Little is known about the languages encountered by the Celtic migrants because they were not written languages. Some argue that modern Basque may be a descendant of one of these languages, since it is a tongue bearing no relation to Indo-European (Hualde, *et al.*, 1996). The linguistic situation in the region at the time of the Celtic encounter, however, is not well understood. More is known about Etruscan, a non-Indo-European language encountered by the Italian peoples as they spread through the Italian peninsula. Although Etruscan did not survive the Roman period, the fact that it was a written language meant that a tangible record of the language was available to future generations. The Slavic and Baltic peoples' displaced speakers of the Uralic language family who had moved into eastern Europe several thousand years earlier, but the new immigrants did not overwhelm Uralic speakers everywhere. Uralic speakers have hung on in northern Europe and can still be found in northern Scandinavia, Finland, Estonia and northern Russia to this day (see also Chapter 2).

The current language pattern of Europe is the result of particular historical developments that played out on this largely Indo-European base over the past 2500 years. The easiest way to make sense of the pattern is to recognize that most modern European languages fall within three major branches of Indo-European: an offshoot of the Italic branch called Romance, the Germanic branch and the Slavic branch (Figure 3.3). Understanding how these branches of Indo-European came to dominate in south-west, north-west, and eastern Europe, respectively, goes a long way towards explaining the general character of the modern European language map.

The Romance branch

The Romance branch traces its roots to the extraordinary ancient history of the speakers of one of the

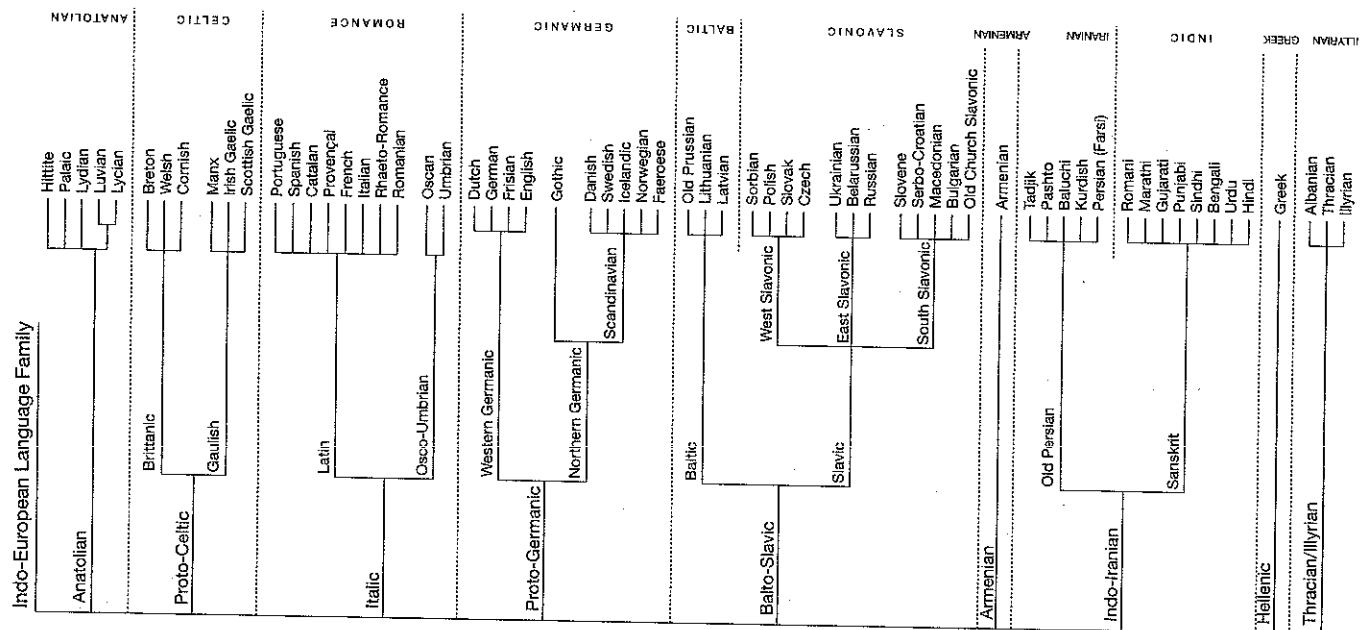


Figure 3.1 Indo-European language family tree.

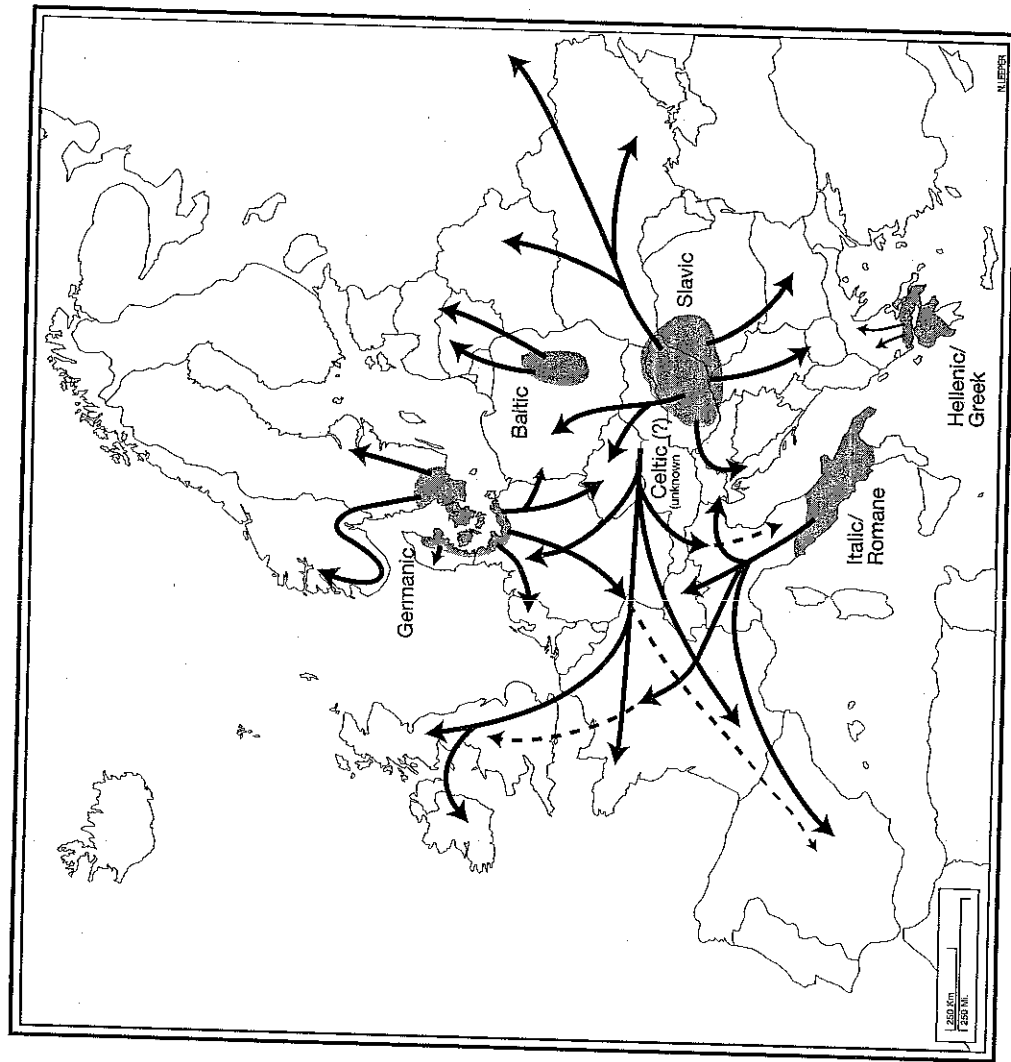
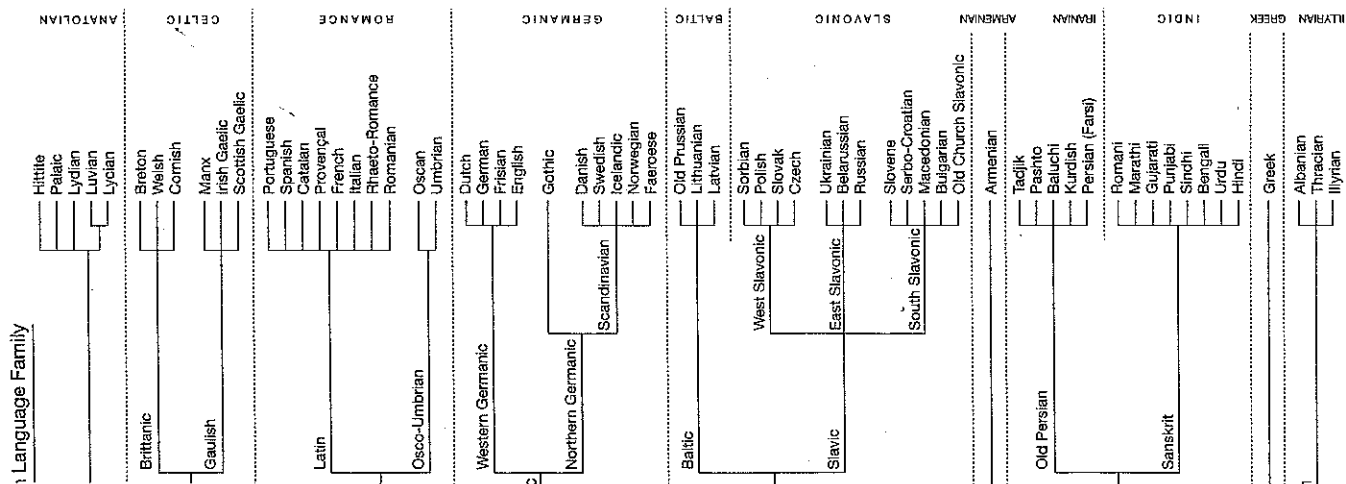


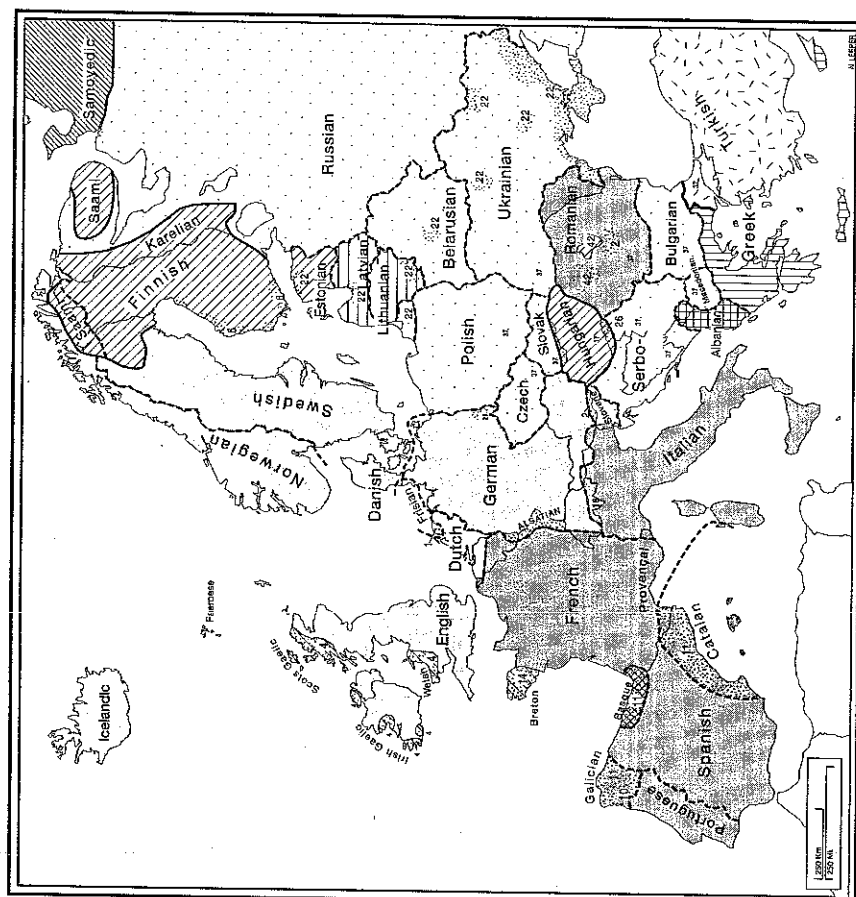
Figure 3.2 Possible hearth areas of major Indo-European language branches and directions of dispersal.

Italic languages. Latin (see generally Elcock, 1975). The speakers of Latin – the Romans – lived in the central part of the Italian peninsula, and ultimately built an empire that stretched from the shores of the Mediterranean to southern Scotland in the north-west, and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Black Sea in the east. The Romans did not force their language and culture on conquered peoples, but they did impose an administrative and trade system based on Latin. As such, those who were tied in with the formal operation of the Empire came to speak Latin. In those areas where the Roman Empire held sway

for long periods of time, Latin assumed a sufficiently prominent position that it became the primary tongue of the upper classes and an important medium of communication throughout the Empire. The major exception was in Greece, where the cultural and social institutions that had evolved prior to the rise of the Roman Empire were sufficiently robust to withstand the influence of Latin.

The collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD was precipitated in part by invasions from the north and east of speakers of Germanic tongues. Throughout much of the eastern and northern parts





Major Indo-European Branches

Germanic group

- WESTERN GERMANIC
1 Dutch
2 German
3 Frisian
4 English
5 Danish
6 Swedish
7 Norwegian
8 Icelandic
9 Faeroese

Romance group

- 10 Portuguese
11 Spanish
12 Catalan
13 Provençal
14 French
15 Italian
16 Rhaeto-Romanic
17 Romanian

Slavic group

- WEST SLAVIC
18 Polish
19 Slovak
20 Czech
21 Sorbian
EAST SLAVIC
22 Russian
23 Ukrainian
24 Belarusian
25 Slovene
26 Serbo-Croatian
27 Macedonian
28 Bulgarian

Other Indo-European Branches

Celtic group

- BRITANNIC
29 Breton
30 Welsh
31 Irish Gaelic
32 Scots Gaelic

Baltic group

- 33 Latvian
34 Lithuanian

Hellenic

- 35 Greek

Thracian/Illyrian group

- 36 Albanian

Indo-Iranian group

- 37 Romani

Uralic Language Family

Finnic group

- 38 Finnish
39 Karelian
40 Saami
41 Estonian
42 Hungarian

Samoyedic group

- 44 Samoyedic

Altaic Language Family

Turkic group

- 45 Turkish

Other Languages

Basque

- 45 Basque

Areas with significant concentrations of other languages (usually adjacent national languages).

Boundary between Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages.

Boundary between Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages.

Figure 3.3 Linguistic map of Europe (after Jordan 1996, and other sources).

Germanic Europe thus loosely corresponds with a modestly retracted northern boundary of the Roman Empire (Figure 3.3). The major exception is in the British Isles, where invasions – first from what is now Germany and Denmark and later from other parts of Scandinavia – led to the almost complete displacement of Latin-based tongues by Germanic languages.

As the Germanic peoples spread out, Celtic tongues continued to decline in northern Europe. Many of them ultimately died out, and those that hung on did so in peripheral areas (see Chapter 2, and generally MacAulay, 1992). The story throughout the rest of the Germanic world also mirrors that of the Romance world; the particular languages that emerged out of the Germanic linguistic soup – principally German, Dutch, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic and English – were those of peoples who were able to establish a degree of political and economic control over a substantial area.

As a general rule, the Germanic tongues have substantially different sentence structures and vocabularies from their Romance counterparts. A partial exception is the Germanic tongue of the British Isles, because the Norman Invasion of 1066 brought speakers of an early form of French into England. As conquerors, the Norman invaders assumed a dominant role in the social and political structure of the early English state. They were too small in number to change the essential character of the Germanic tongues that they encountered, but they introduced a new language that coexisted, and ultimately blended, with the Germanic tongues of the pre-Norman inhabitants of the region (McCrum *et al.*, 1986). As a result, English has two words for many things that are described by a single word in other languages. In English people both sweat and perspire; they are tired or fatigued; they seek help or aid. English speakers also refer to an animal in the field as a pig, but when the meat of that animal is consumed they call it pork. These features of English reflect the blended or composite character of the language. They even tell us something about the social structure of Norman England. The terms that have a more everyday feel to them – sweat, tired, help, pig – are Germanic in origin, whereas the terms that connote sophistication – perspire, fatigued, aid, pork – are related to the early French of the Normans. This is a clear reflection of the social situation in Norman England, where the speakers of a Romance tongue were the élite.

The Slavic branch

The largest branch of Indo-European in Europe in terms of numbers of speakers is the Slavic branch. There are three major subgroups of Slavic: South Slavic, West Slavic and East Slavic (see generally Comrie and Corbett, 1993). These subgroups have their origins in the splintering of the Slavic branch that occurred as Slavic Indo-Europeans spread throughout the eastern portion of the North European Plain and farther south into the Balkans beginning in the third century AD. The collapse of the Roman Empire created an opportunity for the South Slavic peoples to move into the Balkans in the fifth and sixth centuries. These peoples ultimately overwhelmed the vestiges of Latin and older tongues in most of south-east Europe. In the process, the South Slavs came to occupy the dominant cultural position in the region. Their tongues eventually crystallized into modern Serbo-Croatian, Bulgarian and Macedonian (Figure 3.3).

Other Slavic peoples stayed in the Hungarian Plain or moved north, west and east. Those Slavs that moved to the east and north-east formed the Eastern Slavonic offshoot of Slavic. Their languages evolved into modern Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian. The Western Slavonic peoples stayed in the Hungarian Plain or migrated to the north and west. Those moving to the north settled in what is now the Czech Republic and western Poland, pushing the Baltic peoples farther to the north. The westward migrants moved into modern Slovenia. Collectively, these peoples spoke tongues that were the antecedents of modern Polish, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian and Sorbian. The in-migration into the Hungarian Plain of Magyars speaking a tongue in the Uralic language family in the ninth and tenth centuries occurred at the expense of the Western Slavonic peoples (see Hungarian case study). Those in the Hungarian Plain were assimilated or pushed out, and those in Slovenia were cut off from their northern cousins (Figure 3.3).

As the Western Slavonic peoples spread to the west, they encountered Germanic peoples. In the Middle Ages the boundary between Germanic and Slavic speakers lay approximately along the Elbe and Saale Rivers (Jordan, 1996). German expansion to the east eventually pushed that boundary back, and more recent political developments led to its consolidation along the current Polish–German boundary.

continued

Romania. Here two groups must be spotlighted. First the Szeklers (Hungarian: *székely*; Romanian: *Secui*), who are an ethnographically (and perhaps originally ethnically) distinct part of the Hungarian-speaking community in multicultural Transylvania, settled by the monarch along the easternmost fringe of the Kingdom of Hungary as its guardians, in return for certain privileges of which an awareness still remains. More than three-quarters of the population of the Carpathian counties of Harghita (Hungarian: *Hargita*) and Covasna (Hungarian: *Kovászna*) are still Hungarian-speaking. Especially amongst 'mainland' intellectuals in the Hungarian Republic, the Szeklers have been mythicized as the essence of Magyarhood and their speech is often claimed as the purest and most attractive variety of the language. For many mainlanders, the non-Szekler Hungarians of Transylvania also bask in the Szekler glow, with even important 20th century novels about the past of Transylvania being entitled 'Fairy Garden' (Zsigmond Móricz, *Tündérkert*, 1922). Interestingly, however, when a wave of Transylvanian Hungarian emigration swept over Hungary in the early 1990s, many Szeklers complained that their dialect was a definite disadvantage in securing employment in Budapest, a stark contrast between myth and reality. Romania's other group of Hungarian speakers to have a distinctive designation are the 40,000 to 100,000 originally Roman Catholic speakers of the heavily Romanian-influenced dialect-cluster known as Csángó Hungarian. The Csángós live mainly in the villages and small towns around Bacău (Hungarian: *Báka*) in Romanian Moldavia.

Thus, at least one in four of all Hungarian speakers in the region lives outside Hungary proper, and form numerically the largest minority in Europe, apart from the total number of Russians living outside Russia. Magyar is a unitary language, in that (apart from Csángó) there are no great dialect differences; certainly, the distances between the regional varieties of British English are much greater. The language itself is unusual in a number of ways. It is genetically Uralic, with its closest kin in north-west Siberia, and although a distant cousin of Finnish and Estonian, it is unrelated to any of the languages that surround it

today. The discovery of its remote kinship, the story of the language's survival through centuries of the trek from the vicinity of the Urals, its endurance and adaptation to European conditions through further centuries of Christianity and Islam – all these factors helped strengthen Magyar's role as the outstanding component of the new definition of nation, more potent than other elements – such as the constitution, folklore, religion (and holy relics, like St Stephen's crown), music and even national dress – which the emerging élite used to articulate a cohesive Hungarian past.

Magyar survived Herder's prophecy of 1791, that *nach Jahrhunderten wird man vielleicht ihre Sprache kaum finden* (in a few centuries their [i.e. the Hungarians'] language will perhaps hardly exist). Though it might easily have been fulfilled earlier in the century, by the time it reached Hungary the movement to renew the language (the *Nyelvújítás*) was in full swing. This is not to say that the nightmare vision of the death of the nation (*nemzethalál*) did not haunt the Romantics and others for a long time; but it haunted them, and their readers, in Magyar. For a few crucial decades, every literate person in the land debated the future of the language: grammars were written to prove that Magyar was just as precise and well-ordered a language as Latin or German; spelling was standardized; historians of the language and writers fought bitterly over the creation of new words; Latin (the Hungarians' 'father-tongue' and the language of public life until the 1840s) and German were supplanted in their technical domains; poets wrestled with the beauty or ugliness of new coinages; and all the while the friction, and the translations, and just the sheer increase in the volume of writing helped, by the end of the century, to hone this Uralic language into the flexible, all-purpose European instrument that we know today. A still-current slogan from the mid-19th century sums up the intimacy of the link: *Nyelvén él a nemzet* (A nation lives in its language).

However, not all Hungarian speakers have benefited to the full. The story of those Hungarian speakers left in the successor states remains to be written, but it is certain to be a mainly unhappy tale, if seen in terms of human (and especially linguistic) rights of the Hungarian minorities. In the

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Hungary, Hungarians and the Hungarian language

Peter Sherwood

The terms Hungary, Hungarians and the Hungarian language have meant different things at different times, and the varying nature of the overlap between them has been a notable source of tension throughout the history of the region. Here we focus on each in turn, in order to illuminate a problem that is now thought of in mainly linguistic terms, but which will continue to affect European integration well into the next millennium.

The Kingdom of Hungary was established in the year 1000, barely a century after the arrival of the pagan Hungarians in the region, by St Stephen, whence its more precise technical designation as the Lands of the Crown of St Stephen. Its territory included Upper Hungary (now the Slovak Republic) and swathes of land which are now parts of easternmost Austria, north-eastern Slovenia, Vojvodina (now Serbian), as well as westernmost Ukraine (Transcarpathia); and from early times, Hungary had a special relationship with Croatia. Transylvania, though historically much smaller than the present-day province of Romania bearing that name, was also intimately linked with Hungary. Southern and central Hungary was occupied by the Ottoman Turks in the 16th and 17th centuries, and from this time Hungary was in thrall to the Habsburgs, whose rule was not dislodged in the revolution of 1848–49, but with whom an accommodation was reached in the form of the Austro-Hungarian, or Dual, Monarchy between 1867 and what became World War I. That war brought to an end an unprecedented economic boom and also, in the Treaty of Trianon of 1920, the multinational Kingdom of Hungary (only about 50% Hungarian-speaking in 1914), which lost half its population and some two-thirds of its territory. Admiral Horthy's interwar authoritarian 'regency' tried to secure the return of the lost Lands of the Crown of St Stephen, but being on the losing side in World War II only reduced Hungary's territory even further.

Hence Hungarian as applied to a person can be a problematic label. For centuries the *natio Hungarica* was defined largely in terms of social class, consisting only of the nobility, which comprised almost 5% of the population, and county

officials and other professionals; serfs, town burghers and even the aristocracy did not count as members of the Hungarian nation. Until the 18th century, this is the most usual sense of 'Hungarian' (*hungaricus*) as applied to a person, though the Latin term was also used in the sense of 'from the Hungarian kingdom'. The roots of the Enlightened sense of 'Hungarian nation', that is of a notion of *magyar nemzet* as the 'community of all Hungarian speakers', must reach into the 18th century, but it is likely that the full modern sense blossomed only as the achievements of the language renewal movement made possible the enunciation of the nobility's programme of political reform in the first decades of the 19th century. This sense of Hungarian ('member of the Hungarian nation') exists to this day and must be carefully distinguished from the post-1945 sense 'citizen of the Hungarian Republic' ('People's Republic' in Communist times), even if 95% or more of the latter are also the former. Indeed, the fall of communism has allowed the difference between these two definitions to come to the fore.

Table 3.1 Numbers of Magyar speakers living outside Hungary in the 1990s

Slovak Republic	566 000
Ukraine (Transcarpathia)	180 000
Romania (mainly Transylvania)	2 000 000
Former Yugoslavia (mainly Vojvodina, in the 1980s)	400 000
Slovenia	9 500
Austria (Burgenland only)	4 000

Magyar (Hungarian) is today the first, and often only, language of over 10 million people in the Hungarian Republic. It is also spoken by more than 3 million as their first or best language in those former Lands of the Crown of St Stephen which formed, or were secured by, neighbouring countries. Bilingualism is common, but needs to be systematically investigated. Table 3.1 gives carefully estimated figures of Magyar speakers living outside Hungary. These Hungarian speakers all live in communities located alongside or near the respective borders with Hungary, with one very important exception: the Hungarian speakers of

continued

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largely rural western areas (Burgenland, Slovenia) there seem to be few linguistic problems beyond natural attrition. Elsewhere in the region, however, the Hungarian speakers are embattled. Vojvodina has been devastated by the Balkan war and many of its Hungarian speakers are homeless or are emigrating. In both Transylvania and the Slovak Republic, complex laws regulate the public use of language, restricting the use of Hungarian to certain geographical areas and/or spheres of activity. Regulated in this way are parliamentary discussion, place, street and even personal names, the language of the media, telecommunications and transport, commerce, manufacturing and services, and the language of schooling, where even in the few minority schools that exist some subjects or classes are taught in the state language by law or at the request of non-Hungarian parents. In the Slovak Republic, for example, the new Language Law, enforced by language police from 1 January 1997, provides stiff penalties for such offences as displaying bilingual signs which do not have the Slovak text first, or failing to address a new customer in Slovak.

Further reading

- Czigány, L. (1984) *The Oxford History of Hungarian Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
 Frič, P. et al. (1993) *The Hungarian Minority in Slovakia*, EGEM, Prague.
 Gal, S. (1979) *Language Shift: Social Determinants of Linguistic Change in Bilingual Austria*, Academic Press, New York.
 Hajdú, P. (1975) *Fimo-Ugrian Languages and Peoples*, André Deutsch, London.
 Ignotus, P. (1972) *Hungary*, Ernest Benn, London.
 Schöpflin, G. and Poulton, H. (1990) *Romania's Ethnic Hungarians*, Minority Rights Group Report, London.

The Eastern Slavonic group, by contrast, pushed back or assimilated the Uralic and Altaic peoples living in what is now the Ukraine and Russia. With the subsequent expansion of Russia, the speakers of the most important Eastern Slavonic language moved east, ultimately crossing Siberia. From a linguistic standpoint, then, the notion of Europe ending at the Urals is nonsensical. There is a continuous distribution of Russian speakers from the shores of the Baltic to the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

The coming of the Magyars in the ninth and tenth centuries had significance for Slavs beyond those living on the Hungarian Plain. Since the area the Magyars occupied lay between the Romance language zone east of the Carpathians and the Germanic zone of the eastern Alps, the Magyar invasion effectively cut off the South Slavs from their linguistic cousins to the north. Under the circumstances, one might have expected a great divergence of tongues in the Slavic world. Considerable divergence took place, but it was slowed in the east by the use of a standard form of a South Slavonic tongue

At the Battle of Merseburg in AD 933 it is recorded that from the still-pagan Hungarians *vero turpis et diabolica hui, hui frequenter auditur* (a truly dreadful and diabolical *hui hui* could often be heard) (Jakubovich and Pais, 1929: 12). A millennium later the Hungarian language is still powerfully heard in central Europe, and continues to pose a problem for European integration.

known as Old Church Slavonic in the texts and liturgies of the rapidly expanding Eastern Orthodox Church (Comrie, 1990a).

Other language groups

Those European languages that do not fall within one of the three dominant branches of Indo-European were nonetheless heavily influenced by the spread of Romance, Germanic and Slavic tongues (Figure 3.3). The language of the Basques may represent the last remnants of pre-Indo-European speech in Europe. Celtic speakers came to be increasingly marginalized in Europe, and now occupy relatively limited areas along the western margins of the continent. Speakers of Uralic tongues dominate in Finland and Estonia, as well as in some of the more peripheral parts of northern Scandinavia and Russia. The Baltic peoples were pushed to the north by the Slavs and now occupy a position on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea in modern-day Latvia and

Lithuania. The Uralic-speaking Hungarians (see case study) are one of the few groups outside the three major Indo-European branches that occupy an area of central political and economic significance. The Hungarians displaced Indo-European speakers, not the reverse, and the good agricultural land they occupied helped them to prosper (Fodor, 1982). Romani, a language of the Indo-Iranian branch of Indo-European (see Figure 3.1), is spoken by the Roma, otherwise known as Gypsies. The 2-3 million European Roma are scattered throughout south-east, central and south-west Europe. Their language is related to the Indic tongues of south Asia.

The other languages in Europe that fall outside the three major Indo-European branches are concentrated in the south-east (Comrie, 1990b). Modern Greek is a much-changed descendant of ancient Greek, and therefore falls in the Hellenic branch of Indo-European. Albanian is a language in the so-called Thracian branch of Indo-European that traces its roots to migrants from Anatolia. It has been much affected by neighbouring languages and has split into two main dialects - Gheg in the north and Tosk in the south. Turkish, an Altaic language, has some presence in modern Greece and Bulgaria. Turkish is also one of several languages from North Africa and south-west Asia that found its way into northern and western Europe when guest-worker immigrants moved into the region beginning in the 1960s.

The emergence of modern European languages

Despite the high degree of linguistic diversity found in modern Europe, there are far fewer languages and dialects today than there were 1000 years ago. This is not just because speakers of tongues belonging to one of the three main Indo-European branches in Europe assimilated other peoples or pushed them to the side. It is because the large number of dialects and languages in the major branches have given way to a relatively modest number of tongues. Thus, as recently as 200 years ago a number of different Romance languages/dialects could be found in what is now southern Belgium, including standardized French, Walloon, Picard, Liégeois and Lorrain (Baetens Beardsmore, 1981). Today, French dominates throughout the region, and speakers of regional dialects are relatively few in number.

The process by which certain tongues emerged at the expense of others is firmly rooted in the intersection of politics, technology and literary culture. In particular, the splintering of languages that characterized much of European history was reversed by the development and dissemination of literary texts (Eisenstein, 1979). The reversal occurred in places with both the means to produce standardized texts and the infrastructure to ensure that those texts could be widely disseminated and used. In the Middle Ages, only certain religious institutions and political communities had the ability to produce and disseminate such texts. Religious institutions played this role in some parts of eastern Europe through the use of Old Church Slavonic. Elsewhere in eastern Europe, certain regional languages gained prominence over others in places characterized by relative political stability and sufficient economic resources to support the development of a literary culture. In the western part of Europe, religious institutions played a minimal role before the Reformation because religious texts were written primarily in Latin. Instead, a few organized political communities provided venues where literary cultures could develop and flourish.

The 16th century signalled the beginnings of a major shift in the linguistic geography of Europe. That century saw an expanding use of the printing press and the growing ability of certain political leaders to consolidate control over wider territorial domains. The printing press, originally developed in the 15th century, provided an economical means of producing written documents on an unprecedented scale (Eisenstein, 1979). Those with access to the technology had a vast advantage in the linguistic arena. Not surprisingly, those working in prosperous cities were usually the ones who had the greatest access to the printing press and its products. When such cities were at the heart of expanding political realms, they were the key nodes for the spread of standardized linguistic norms, as the infrastructure of territorial control facilitated the dissemination of printed texts.

The sorts of texts that became vehicles of linguistic standardization varied from place to place, but in many areas religious texts were of pre-eminent importance. This was particularly true in the parts of northern and western Europe where the Reformation took root (see Chapter 4). The resultant production of vernacular bibles had an extraordinary influence on the development of German and English, respectively. Both were widely

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disseminated and both helped to make a particular variant of a language the standardized, dominant form. The publication of literary works, and later dictionaries, furthered this process.

With the coming of the age of nationalism (see Chapter 6), language came to be even more closely tied to the political arena. Nationalist ideology was premised on the idea that distinct nations have the right to control their own affairs. Language, in turn, was seen as a key ingredient in defining nationhood. Against this ideological backdrop, language and politics became inextricably intertwined. National movements based their claims on real or perceived linguistic continuities, and political leaders of emerging states saw the promotion of linguistic uniformity as a key to their survival. The map of languages in Europe today is a testimonial to the winners and losers in the struggles over nation creation and nation building during the last two centuries.

Each language on the modern European scene developed in a distinctive way, but a brief examination of the cases of French and Polish shows the importance of the influences outlined above. What we now call French traces its roots to the Francien dialect of the Paris region (Rickard, 1989). That dialect was one of many that could be found in the Middle Ages in what is now French-speaking Europe. With the emergence of the Paris region as an increasingly coherent, politically powerful entity in the 12th century, the Francien dialect assumed greater importance. That importance grew as the rulers of the expanding French state worked to create a highly centralized political entity with Paris at its core. By the 15th century, the language of the Paris region was seen as a key unifying force in a realm that stretched from the North Sea to the Mediterranean and encompassed Flemish speakers in the north, Celtic speakers in the north-west, and speakers of various dialects of Occitan, sometimes called *langue d'oc*, in the south. A clear statement of the importance placed on the French of the Paris region came in 1539, when the authorities in Paris adopted the Edict of Villers-Cotterêts making Parisian French the official language throughout the so-called royal domains (Green, 1994).

The Edict of Villers-Cotterêts coincided with the development of a variety of texts that facilitated the spread of a standardized form of French. These included the first grammar of French and the first French dictionary, both published in 1531 (Kibbee, 1994). The printing press allowed for these and other

texts to be disseminated widely, and the state backed this endeavour. Thus, the French of the Paris Basin gained ground rapidly. By the late 18th century, French nationalists treated French as a defining characteristic of national identity, and the French language was affirmed as a symbol of national identity and culture by the post-Revolutionary Convention of 1794. The subsequent development of a national education system solidified the position of French throughout modern-day France. Until recently regional languages were strongly discouraged, and any language other than French was not recognized in official circles.

The story of Polish shows some of the same influences at work as in the French case, albeit against the backdrop of a very different political history. During the eighth and ninth centuries, what is now Poland was home to a variety of West Slavonic languages, including a so-called Lechitic tongue that was the ancestor of modern Polish (Stone, 1990). The latter half of the tenth century saw the rise of a dynasty in the area between the Oder and Vistula Rivers dominated by a tribe called the Polanie, a name meaning 'inhabitants of the plains'. The Polanie, who had converted to Roman Christianity, established control over a variety of other tribes, and in the process, their particular Lechitic tongue as well as their religion came to dominate the core of the early Polish state.

With the split of the Western and Eastern churches in 1054, the Polanie saw themselves as an outpost of western culture, and the leaders of the early Polish state were therefore much concerned with advancing their language and religion in the region. They also sought to create a realm that could withstand the eastward pressure of Germanic peoples. Capitalizing on their wealth and strategic position, as well as their ties with the western Church, the Polish rulers constructed one of the best integrated political entities of late-medieval Europe, in the process solidifying the dominance of their particular tongue – Polish – throughout their realm (Davies, 1982). They were helped in this regard by the introduction of printing technology into Poland in 1513, which helped to fuel a Golden Age of Polish literature in the 16th century.

The first partition of Poland in 1722 signalled the beginning of a difficult period for the Polish language that was to last until the restoration of Polish independence after World War I (Stone, 1990). The partitioning powers (Prussia, Austria and Russia) sought to reduce the social and economic functions of Polish, but despite substantial discrimination

against Polish speakers they were unable to obliterate a language that had already fostered a rich literary tradition and that was deeply rooted in local culture. Indeed, with the dawn of the Age of Nationalism in the 19th century, the Polish language became one of the focal points around which the movement for an independent Poland was organized. That movement finally achieved its goal after World War I, when the framers of the post-war European political map saw the Poles as a distinct linguistic and national community entitled to self-determination.

Poland in 1918 was established within boundaries that were different from those of today; both its eastern and western boundaries were farther east than their present equivalents, and most of what is now northern Poland was under German control (Pogonowski, 1988). The re-emergence of Poland within these boundaries provided a secure political-territorial foundation within which the Polish language could once again flourish. Many minorities lived in post-World War I Poland, however, including Germans, Jews, Ukrainians, Belorussians and Lithuanians. These minorities found themselves marginalized in a state whose identity was tied up with the Polish language and with Roman Catholicism.

World War II saw yet another partition of Poland, and a Nazi-led campaign against certain minorities. When Poland was recreated within its present boundaries, it was seen as the state of the Poles – a people defined in part by their language. Consequently, most non-Polish speakers (particularly Germans) left the country. At the same time, many Poles who found themselves outside the new state moved to those areas being vacated. Thus, post-World War II Poland came to be a relatively homogeneous state, with upwards of 98% of its population speaking Polish (Barnett, 1958). To this day the boundaries of the state define the boundaries of the language region, and the state itself functions as a key institution in the continuing reproduction of the Polish language.

Language and politics in contemporary Europe

The contemporary linguistic geography of Europe has been heavily influenced by the rise of the modern state system. However, this does not mean that a single language is spoken in most countries. Minority languages are present in almost all European states,

and in some states – most notably Belgium and Switzerland (see case study) – at least a third of the population speaks a language other than the tongue spoken by the majority. Given the close tie between language and nationalism, it is not surprising that speakers of minority languages have not always fared well in 19th and 20th century Europe. From the Hungarian speakers of Romania to the Gaelic speakers of north-west Scotland and Ireland, minority language communities have struggled against linguistic assimilation by dominant national language communities.

There are a few states that have long adopted a generous attitude towards their linguistic minorities, most notably Finland and the Netherlands (Stephens, 1978). These, however, are the exceptions. Before the 1960s, most states treated linguistic assimilation as a stated policy objective. Schools were not allowed to offer instruction in minority languages, and few provisions were made for the incorporation of minority languages in public affairs. Such policies eventually led to the disappearance of some languages, such as Manx on the Isle of Man, and the marginalization of others, as with Breton in France. Organized reaction to such policies started to grow in the 1960s, and governments gradually responded (see Weinstein, 1990). The last few decades have seen the adoption of policies permitting the use of minority languages in schools. In some cases there has even been public support for publications and radio and television broadcasts in minority languages.

In the case of states where more than one language is of national significance, there is a potential for language conflict to challenge the very stability of the state. In such instances the character of internal political geographic arrangements can be a key to the maintenance of harmony. Switzerland and Belgium present an interesting contrast in this regard. In the Swiss case, language has always been a matter that is dealt with at the level of the canton, the basic administrative unit of the country, and linguistic politics do not therefore challenge the integrity of the state (see case study of Switzerland, and McRae, 1983; Steiner, 1983). Belgium, by contrast, is made up of three primary language regions, Dutch-speaking Flanders, French-speaking Wallonia, and the bilingual Brussels region. The state's internal political geography is a function of relatively recent conflicts between the language communities (Murphy, 1988). With powers over a variety of issues vested in units that correspond loosely to language boundaries, the

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The geography of languages in Switzerland

André-Louis Sanguin

One of the essential legal principles on which Switzerland is founded is the equality of the rights of national languages. Indeed, in Article 116 revised in 1938, the Federal Constitution stipulates: 'German, French, Italian and Romansch are the national languages of Switzerland. German, French and Italian are declared as the official languages of the Confederation'. Moreover, at the cantonal level, Bern, Fribourg and Valais have two official languages (French and German), while Graubünden possess three (German, Romansch and Italian). The distinction between national languages and official languages is highly important. The national language is the language of the people and recognized as such, with its status being the constitutional establishment of its existence amongst an ethnic community integrated into the state. The official language is the state language, that is to say, the one used by all state organs and organizations. Language is a cultural carrier and is therefore of major interest for geographers concerned with spatial distributions. Switzerland represents, in miniature, the linguistic kaleidoscope of Europe. In this perspective, the distribution of languages in the Confederation, the interactions between different types of speech, and other spatial variables of an environmental or cultural order are of fundamental interest.

The Swiss linguistic mosaic is often linked to the physical environment, with the distribution of land types being seen as reflected in the linguistic map. Thus mountain and hill zones often delimit linguistic frontiers, with parts of the Alps forming divisions between German, French and Italian-speaking zones. For example, the St Gothard Pass is German-speaking on its northern slope but Italian on the southern slope. However, conversely, linguistic limits also cut across plains. In the Upper Rhine and where side valleys join the Rhône, a spatial stiding of linguistic boundaries has been observable for several centuries. The mountains can equally, though, be considered as places of linguistic refuge, explaining for example the survival of the Rhaetoromansch islet in Graubünden. These illustrations highlight the central problematic of Swiss territorial-linguistic limits, as a

consequence of which arises the question of the extent to which the linguistic factor acts as a barrier within the Confederation. The relationship between physical and human elements, in terms of the political geography of multilingualism, cannot simply be reduced to the point where a physiographic map can answer all of the questions. Contrary to other countries, Swiss multilingualism is essentially a *juxtaposed* multilingualism, in the sense that the linguistic domains are placed side by side, but are not copied and do not interpenetrate. The only departure from this rule is the Rhaetoromansch situation. Indeed the Romansch-speaking space is not compact, and in numerous places it imperfectly perforates the German-speaking Graubünden territory. Here it is possible to speak of a *superimposed* multilingualism.

Swiss multilingualism, for the majority, takes on a sense of spatial juxtaposition of linguistic areas. It would thus be incorrect to consider Switzerland as a polyglot state. Nowhere are the four national languages and the three official languages mixed or superimposed. Swiss multilingualism is all the more unique because of its precise link with federalism, and one of the most significant accidents in Swiss history has been the spatial non-coincidence of language and religious frontiers. The combination of religious and linguistic structures has created a political framework of great complexity. Swiss multilingualism finds its roots in a long tradition of a local sense of community identity; the principle of linguistic equality is the consequence of the principle of a cantonal equality. It was the Helvetic Republic (1798–1803) which marked the birth of today's multilingualistic Switzerland. This, for the first time, placed German, French and Italian-speaking citizens on the base of complete equality before the law. By the decree of 20 September 1798, the laws of the Republic were published in the three major languages. The Mediation Act preserved this equality. The appeared temporarily to the use of German under the 1815 Pact, reappearing permanently in the Federal Constitution of 1848.

The federal consequences of the linguistic context cannot be overstressed. By Article III of the

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Federal Constitution, the cantons (local level) are sovereign insofar as the Constitution does not limit their power in favour of central government. Some specialists thus speak of the sovereignty of the cantons (*Sprachenhoheit*), through which they have the right to determine everything concerning linguistic matters in their territories. This has given birth to another concept, the principle of territoriality (*Territorialitätsprinzip*), according to which all cantons or all linguistic domains have the right to preserve and defend their linguistic character against all exterior elements which might distort or endanger them. In this way the *Sprachenhoheit* prevents the linguistic unit of a region from being put in danger by the immigration of people with another language. This can only be stopped by their linguistic assimilation. This principle applies to parts of the cantons linguistically differentiated, but especially to unilingual cantons. The *Territorialitätsprinzip* is accepted everywhere in Switzerland as an acquired fact, one with no return. As a consequence, there is an obligation for immigrants of another language to assimilate into their new milieu and to enrol their children in local schools. This results in remarkable stability of linguistic frontiers. With the exception of a few specific places, the boundaries have changed very little since Switzerland's creation. For more than 3000 municipalities counted at present, only six have changed their linguistic regime since 1848.

Swiss multilingualism raises some fascinating consequences for the structure of its society. The German-speakers (Alemannics), even if they form the majority group with nearly 75% of the population, are nevertheless divided into 26 different dialects. These show a tendency to become more uniform and to create a common idiom, the *Schwyzerdütsch*, which is clearly differentiated from literary German (*Hochdeutsch*). Here is a typical case of *diglossia*. Indeed the cultural and social situation of the Alemannics demands that one sphere of life be conducted in *Hochdeutsch*, while the other sphere is the domain of a different manner of speaking, the *Schwyzerdütsch*. The situation in French-speaking Switzerland is completely different; the dialects (patois) of local country people have disappeared, and the spoken and written language has become very close to

universal French. The speech of the Romansch people (50,000 people) is not homogeneous, but is divided into five literary variants (*sursilvan*, *sutsilvan*, *surmiran*, *puter*, *vallader*) sufficiently distinct that the Graubünden authorities publish primary school alphabet books in all five idioms.

Multilingualism is particularly interesting when Swiss from different origins converse between themselves. When people master two distinct languages they are said to be bilingual. Unfortunately official statistics have never tried to measure the extent of bilingualism practised by Swiss citizens. Empirical observations, however, show that a significant part of the population is capable of conversing in two, three or even four languages. When two or three languages are territorially confined, it is not rare to meet *pidginization* phenomena. By proximity and reciprocal contamination, two languages may be altered and lose their purity. The *pidgin* often adopts the vocabulary or the basic grammar of the first language, but borrows the construction and thinking order of the second. This is a phenomenon that one sees at Biel/Bienne, the only *pidginized* town in Switzerland.

To perceive physiographical limits as the only linguistic cleavage lines is a gross over-simplification of the problem. The linguistic map of Switzerland can also be explained in terms of the movement of ethnic groups, their initial settlement, their subsequent colonization from outside, and their mutual reactions when they enter into contact. Accordingly, it is possible to draw up a fourfold typology of *isoglosses* (linguistic boundaries). A first boundary category can be called *physiographic*, and is found when a linguistic boundary coincides with a ridge-line, a mountain chain or a river. It is illustrated by the frontiers between the Italian-speaking valleys of Southern Graubünden and the rest of the canton (Moesano limited by the San Bernardino Pass, Val Bregaglia separated by the Maloja Pass, and Val Poschiavo by the Bernina Pass). The same occurs for Ticino, cut off from Alemannic Switzerland by the Nufenen, St Gotthard, Lukmanier and Greina Passes.

The break in the longitudinal profile of the Valaisian Rhône provides a transition with the second type of boundary, namely the *historico-administrative* isogloss. Here, between the fifth and

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The break in the longitudinal profile of the Valaisian Rhône provides a transition with the second type of boundary, namely the *historico-administrative* isogloss. Here, between the fifth and

sixth centuries, the limit was fixed between French-speaking Lower Valais and German-speaking Upper Valais, between the Romans and the Walser. With the exception of the aforementioned physiographic elements, the German/French-speaking isogloss is essentially of the *historico-administrative* type. The linguistic limit between Vaud and Berne exactly follows the cantonal boundary, and the same observation can be made for the isogloss between Neuchâtel and Berne fixed on the Zihl Canal connecting Neuchâtel Lake with the Bielersee.

A third category is the *confused* isogloss. This is the case for the linguistic frontier in the cantons of Berne and Fribourg, where extreme confusion reigns, particularly on the northern bank of the Bielersee. Here, the French/German isogloss has overcome the physical obstacle of Lake Biel from Twann (Douanne), Schâfïs (Chavannes), Ligerz (Gléresse), Tüschetz (Alfermée) up to the northern outskirts of Biel/Bienne (Magglingen/Macolin, Leubringen/Evillard). The same observation applies to the isogloss between the Delémont (French-speaking) and Laufen (German-speaking) districts. Often municipal limits are not sufficient to fix it.

A last category is the *perforated* isogloss. This is the case of the Rhaetoromansch zones of Graubünden in osmosis with the German-speaking majority of the canton (57.6% of the resident population). This situation is above all true in the Oberland/Surselva (*Rein anterior*), Domleschg/Sutselva (*Rein posterior*) and the Oberhalbstein/Surmeir (*Julia*). The *sursilvian*, *sutsilvian* and *surmiran* villages float like islets in the middle of an Alemannic sea. This is less true in Lower Engadine, where the *ladin* homogeneity (puter and vallader

administrative structure of Belgium discourages the development of political cleavages that might cut across language lines. Instead, most political issues are structured by a political-geographic framework that pits one language community against the other (Murphy, 1995). Given these circumstances it is not surprising that language has been a much more volatile issue in Belgium than in Switzerland.

Language and politics are also closely linked at scales above the state. The European Union (EU) is a case in point. French and English are widely

languages) is territorially stronger. The same phenomenon is seen in the Gondschlucht and the Zwischbergental (Valais) on the Italian side south of the Simplon Pass).

This typology should not, though, be regarded as rigid. Combinations between different types are possible. For example, the Lower Valais/Berne and Neuchâtel/Berne isoglosses are as much *physiographic* as *historico-administrative*. One can also notice the contrast existing between isoglosses and cantonal boundaries. The latter are perforated with territorial disconnections, whereas the isoglosses never give place to linguistic exclaves, with the exception of the German-speaking village of Bosco-Gurin (Ticino). Hence, according to the present synchronic use of languages, the break is generally clear-cut between two language communities. But from the historical and toponymical viewpoint, there are broad zones of reciprocal influence and interference from each side of a separation line which reflect continuing cultural exchanges and demographic mobility.

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understood by those involved in EU matters, and one or the other of those two languages tends to be used for many day-to-day operations of the EU (see Chapter 9). At the same time, the EU operates under the principle that all major Member State languages should have official status, and representatives from Member States frequently insist on using their national languages in public settings (Krause, 1991). As a result, over 40% of the administrative budget of the EU supports language services, and almost half of all EU employees work in that arena (Henriksen,

1990). Thus, language continues to be seen as an important element of national identity; it is accorded such political and social importance that the participants in the EU are willing to devote enormous resources to ensure that national languages are not displaced by English or French.

Beyond the intergovernmental arena, the growing use of English as a *lingua franca* is seen by many as a problematic development. Steps are being taken in France in particular to purge the French language of English vocabulary, and in many other quarters of Europe serious questions are being raised about what might be lost if local languages disappear or are radically changed by the rush towards English. In eastern Europe, Russian functioned as the *lingua franca* in the post-World War II era, but the fall of the Iron Curtain has led to a rapid shift towards English and German. German has the benefit of tying the former satellite states of the Soviet Union to the economic powerhouse of central Europe, but there is still resistance to German based on memories of the Nazi era.

As Europe heads into the 21st century, its linguistic character will continue to evolve. Languages are dynamic phenomena that do not exist in some space unto themselves. Indeed, the very nature of the tongues we think of as languages may change as political and social developments unfold. This is happening before our eyes in the Balkans, where some Croat nationalists are arguing that the true language of the Croats is not some generic Serbo-Croatian, but a pure Croatian that is purged of various Arabic and Serbian expressions and that incorporates words

coined by Croats many centuries ago, or new words coined by Croatian nationalists (Hedges, 1996). This struggle serves as an important reminder that the study of the geography of languages provides a window into a wider world of conflict and compromise, oppression and liberation. As such, it is a necessary component of any attempt to understand the nature and complexity of place.

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