



THOUGHTS ON A CONCEPT OF LANGUAGE GEOGRAPHY

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Abstract: *It is the goal of this article to highlight the relationship between language and space from the geographical perspective. After a screening of the position of language in sciences and the involvement of geographers so far, selected spatial aspects of language are highlighted: languages as reflections of the spatial context of cultures, spatial spread and retreat of languages and the powers behind them, rise and fall of languages, the different relation of language functions (standard language, dialect, official language, military language, sacred language etc.) to space, the role of language for space-related identity, trade and educational languages and their processes of expansion and regression, the function of place names in relating man to space.*

Keywords: *cultural geography, language, linguistics, conceptual thoughts, culture, space, language functions, space-related identity, place names*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a social phenomenon. As such, it has intrinsic space relation – if only because its speakers are spread over space. Besides, however, language is in many more ways related to space, which are rarely noted. In this paper, I want to highlight some important spatial aspects of language, and give in this way some reasons to consider, why geographers should not be more active in this field and establish a kind of language geography.

2. POSITION OF LANGUAGE IN SCIENCES

Geographers do not so much regard language. There is no explicit sub-discipline in analogy to the study of other cultural population characteristics like religion ('religion geography') or ethnic affiliation ('ethnic geography') – a sub-discipline that could be titled 'language geography' (in German: Sprachengeographie) or 'geolinguistics' (in

German: Geolinguistik).¹ This is certainly true for the German-speaking sphere. ‘Geolinguistics’ is indeed a field of studies in the Anglophone world as much as ‘géolinguistique’ is in the Francophone and ‘geolinguística’ in the Spanish. But they are rather affiliated to linguistics or regarded as interdisciplinary fields with just few geographers engaged in them and far from covering all relations between language and linguistic communities on the one hand and space on the other.² Their pendant in German-speaking linguistics is called ‘language geography’ (Sprachgeographie). This branch of linguistics, however, restricts itself on studying the spatial variation of words and pronunciations within a given language – so just on one out of the variety of spatial aspects of language (see, e.g., GOOSSENS 1969, GOEBL 1984, 1992, 2004).

Language is also a historical phenomenon. It is subject to temporal change and closely related to political conditions. This should attract also historians to be interested in spatial aspects of language and to contribute to it from their perspective. Some examples of this engagement are Cathie CARMICHAEL (BARBOUR & CARMICHAEL 2000), GARDT, HASS-ZUMKEHR & ROELCKE 1999 or KAMUSELLA 2009. Finally, also sociologists, representatives of a discipline closely related to human and cultural geography and originators or many theories applied also in geography could contribute an important part. Roland GIRTLE (1996 and many other works) is to be mentioned here as somebody who had been already very active in this respect. This means that language could in the system of sciences considered to be positioned rather as a multidisciplinary research field, to which besides linguists, historians and sociologists especially geographers – as representatives of the basic space-related science – could contribute a lot (see Fig. 1).

Language as a feature of sciences

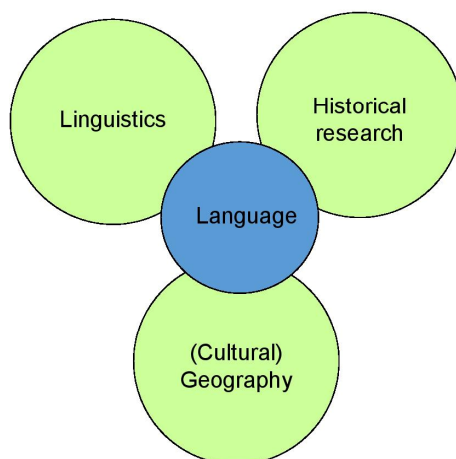


Figure 1: Language in the system of sciences

¹ See WIRTH 1979, MITCHELL 2000, GEBHARDT, REUBER & WOLKERSDORFER 2003, KRINGS 2005, GLASZE & PÜTZ 2007, WEICHHART 2008, WERLEN 2008, GMEINER 2011, RÖCK 2013.

² For ‘geolinguistics’ see a.o. MACKEY 1973, 1988, TRUDGILL 1983, 2004, GUNNEMARK & KENRICK 1985, JOHNSTON 1986, LAPONCE 1987, WILLIAMS 1988 a,b, BRETON 1991, BRITAIN 1991, MILROY & GORDON 2003, DESFORGES & JONES 2010, HOCH 2010; for ‘géolinguistique’ a.o. DAUZAT 1922 and LECLERC 1986; for ‘geolinguística’ a.o. HERNÁNDEZ & JUAN 1999.

3. SPACE-RELATED ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE

Which, then, are the geographical, space-related aspects of language? In which aspects can cultural geographers be especially interested?

3.1. Language reflects the spatial context of cultures.

Language symbolises or codifies concepts by words and makes in this way our system of concepts, our categorisation of the world, our abstraction of the complex and incomprehensible reality, communicable (see Fig. 2). Individual cultures and their languages categorise complex reality in different ways. The mode of categorisation and the preciseness of resolution depend on what is important for a certain culture: People living in snowy regions have several concepts of snow. Shepherds subdivide the concept of sheep by gender, age, visual appearance and even temporary location. Coffee drinker cultures like the Viennese divide coffee into various kinds. Automotive cultures have manifold notions of cars. The words of a language codify all these concepts.

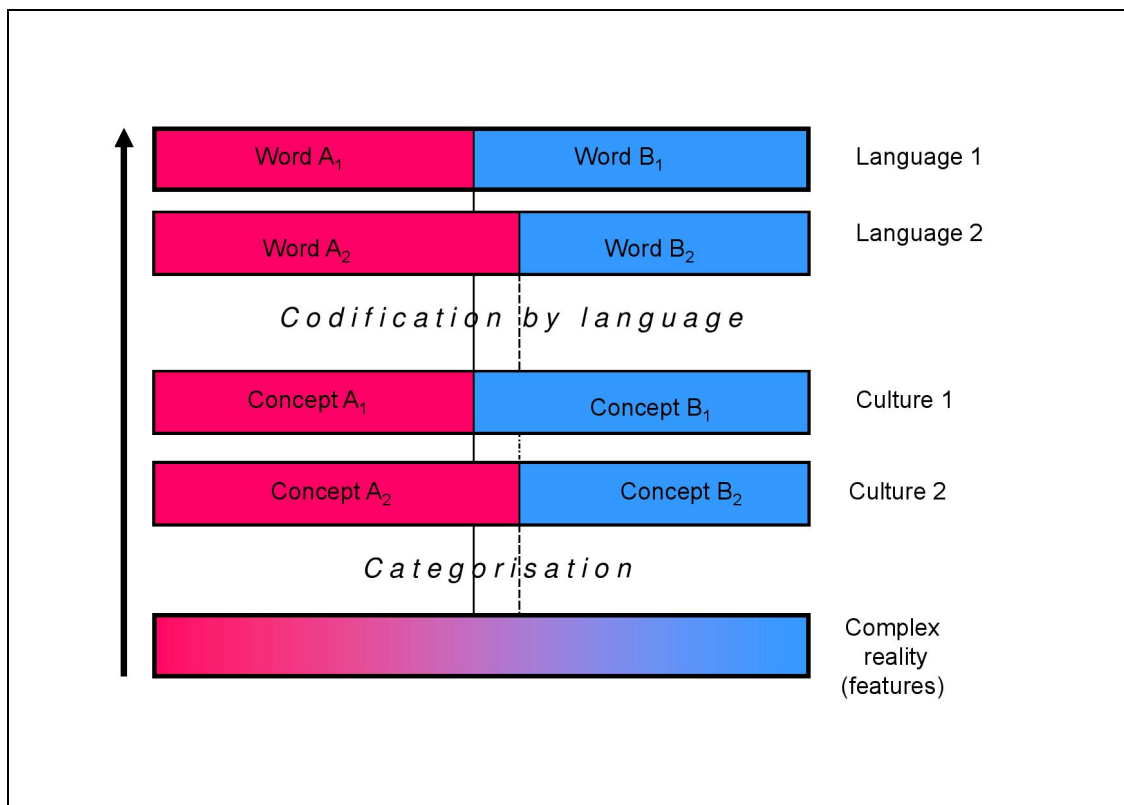


Figure 2: Relation language – concepts – reality (author's draft)

Thus, languages indicate and express the different worldviews of cultures, which in turn depend on the natural environment in which a certain culture is embedded and on the economic and cultural interests, it has. Mediated by the concept system of a certain cultural community, to which a language refers, languages are space-related. Just to present an example in more detail: For traditional seafaring cultures like the dwellers of the Croatian coast, winds are not only an occasional weather phenomenon, but had and

still have a strong impact on their daily life and economy. Wind directions and wind velocities were always important – very much so in times of sailing vessels, but also up to the present day. This made them developing concepts and accordingly words/names for all the various types of winds in their region (see Fig. 3). *Bura* is the word for the heavy cold and dry wind falling down the slopes of the coastal mountain range. It produces a gust that makes the soils of the islands salty and selects vegetation. It can – due to its force – also be a severe obstacle to sea and land traffic and made at least traditional settlements hiding away behind hills and ranges, where they were not as exposed to this wind. *Burin* is the word for a softer variant of the same wind blowing mainly in summer. *Jugo* (‘southerly wind’) is the word for the wind from the Southeast coming up along the Adriatic Sea accompanied by rain and humid air, often resulting in inundations. *Maestral* is the name for the fresh soft wind from the open sea breaking the heat of summer lunchtime hours, *tramontana* (‘across the mountain’) for the wind blowing across the Liburnian mountain range in the North of Kvarner Bay.



Figure 3: Regression of Bask (Source: Lindner and Panagl, 2003, p. 53)

3.2. Language change, rise and fall of languages are space-related phenomena.

Language is a historical phenomenon and always changing. Both rise and fall of languages as such as well as the internal modification of a language as long as it exists display many space-relations, as I will demonstrate.

Rise and fall of languages as such. The “birth” of a new language as well as the fading away of a language refer to political forces behind them. Usually a state or

state-like formation with its educational and political instruments, sometimes also churches, have the power and facilities to establish new languages. Likewise, the loss of former support by a state or church may cause a language regress and finally disappear. Alternatively and additionally, also demographic and socio-economic processes like population decline, migration, the change of economic orientations (industrialisation, towards tourism) connected with the opening up of closed societies and growing mobility may be the reason. All these are space-related phenomena and traditional fields of geographers. The retreat of languages has also typical spatial stages: They retreat to peripheral regions like mountains, peninsulas, islands and wetlands before disappearing completely (HARMANN 2002). A typical example is Bask, the oldest existing language in Europe. It was spread over large parts of the Iberian Peninsula and what is today France before it withdrew into the Pyrenees and its forelands. Since the 19th century it shows also there the typical stages of regression towards the extreme periphery (see Fig. 3).

For Latin all the stages of its rise and fall are well-known. Born as the local language of Rome and Latium, it grew with the rise of the Roman Empire as the political power behind it and became the official language of a global empire. When this empire split in 395 A.C. into a western and an eastern part, it lost first its political support with its normative power in the West and developed into various forms of Vulgar Latin, from where the later Romance languages emerged. The longer preservation of state power in the East resulted in a longer survival of Latin as a standard and official language. In the 8th century, however, East Rome had lost any prospect to re-unify the former Roman Empire and replaced Latin by the autochthonous Greek as its official language. Latin survived still for some time in restricted functions, not unimportantly as the sacred language of the Roman-Catholic Church up to the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, but also a (nominal) official language of Poland up to its final partition in 1795 and of Hungary up to 1844. The longer preservation of Latin with these nations resulted in the use of Latin words up to the present day in contexts, in which other languages have already replaced them by their own words for long. Space-related, i.e. geographical aspects of language in this context are not only areal spread and retreat, but also reference to political and ecclesiastical powers and institutions, whose interactions with space use to be a feature of political and religion geography, respectively.

The temporal character of languages is most obvious with constructed languages. The guiding ideas behind them are to create the 'perfect' language, not burdened by the mix of often logically not compatible influences of a long tradition, and to create a 'neutral' language, which is nobody's mother tongue and prefers nobody. The only greater success was Esperanto, the creation of the Polish Jew and medical doctor Zamenhof, who lived in Białystok, a city in the Northeast of modern Poland with a strong ethnic and linguistic mixture at that time. This hints already at geographical space, its structure and external relations, as relevant for constructed languages. Moreover, also the reasons for a constructed language's (relative) success and failure could be of interest for geographers.

Internal development of languages. As long as a language exists, it receives influences from the outside, i.e. from trade languages, from languages representing an innovation centre in some field of human activities (e.g., computer techniques, music,

dining, clothing, architecture), from languages of political dominators and occupation forces, from languages in the neighbourhood, but also from minority languages in the language's own sphere of dominance. All these are essentially space-related and geographical. Language innovation occurs, however, not only due to external influences, but comes also from the interior of a language community; when, e.g., new words in the same language are created or existing words receive another meaning. Geographically relevant questions then arising are, where the innovation centre is and through which channels innovations diffuse to peripheries. Usually, innovation starts from urban centres or core regions and proceeds towards peripheries along traffic axes and reach peripheries with delay and less vigour. Linguistic islands offside the compact language area use to receive innovations later, only partly or not at all. Language innovations are, by the way, good and relatively easily measurable indicators of cultural innovation processes and their spatial directions in general.

3.3. Language functions have their specific relations to space.

Standard language versus dialect. A standard language as it is codified in dictionaries and grammar books and implemented by states or other political units refers mostly to a country or administrative subunit. It usually changes at country borders, while at the level of dialects a continuum prevails. With dialects a very smooth spatial change prevails – due to the fact that they are much less subject to regulation and not taught in schools with their normative impact. They therefore reflect patterns of real social contacts, also across country borders. They are thus valuable tools to study linguistic diffusion processes. Geographers could use them as indicators for the diffusion of other cultural, social and economic phenomena. Geographical may also be the reason, why a certain dialect has been chosen as the substratum of a standard language. Is it the dialect of the core region, the capital region, the economically dominant region of a certain country? Is it the region with a good location in the transportation network, the region with the highest cultural and historical prestige, the region of the 'main tribe' of a nation, the region, in which the national idea originates or the region with the largest number of inhabitants?

Official language. Official language is a sensitive topic in countries with several languages and linguistic minorities. The reference area, in which a language can be applied officially, is defined in various ways: Austria, e.g., has several linguistic minorities, but only one language has official status all over the country. The official status of minority languages is confined to administrative subunits. In Switzerland and Belgium one of several official languages is exclusively official in a part of the country, while the others have no status there. In Ireland and Canada two languages have official status country-wide. In the United Kingdom and the United States no language is declared official, but English has in fact all the characteristics of the official language. This variety is due to different historical-political, social, economic and cultural situations, which can in their complexity and interrelatedness be explained by geographers.

Military language. Military languages in the sense of languages used in armies sometimes diverge in territorial reference from official languages. In the Austro-Hungarian Army, e.g., was used – with some minor exceptions – just German as the

language of commands and official intercourse, although in the Austrian crownlands several languages had official status. Federal Communist Yugoslavia had three languages exclusively official in an entire federal republic and many more languages official either in autonomous provinces or in a group of communes, but just Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian was the language of the federal army. Also in the Warsaw Pact and in Nato just one language enjoyed/enjoys the status of the official means of communication: Russian and English, respectively.

Ecclesiastical or sacred language. Ecclesiastical or sacred languages in the sense of languages used mainly or exclusively in the ecclesiastical sphere show specific modes of dispersion. They are not bound to countries, mostly also not to ethnic, national or social groups. A characteristic couple in this respect are Latin as the sacred language of the Roman Church and Old Ecclesiastical Slavonic, later Ecclesiastical Slavonic as the sacred language of Slavonic Orthodoxy.

Similar in being supranational, they developed quite in a different way: Latin emerged as the official language of an empire and was later perpetuated by this empire's official church while the secular power had vanished. Ecclesiastical Slavonic had been developed by the missionaries Cyril and Method to be well-understood by the various Slavonic tribes, so for the purposes of mission, and was only later adopted by the Bulgarian Empire.

Trade language or educational language. With trade languages or educational languages in the sense of languages acquired in addition to a native language or mother tongue geographically interesting are especially patterns of spread, reasons for spread, current moves of expansion and retreat, their stratification into global, continental and regional languages. All these aspects depend not just on the linguistic qualities of a language, but even more on political and economic forces behind it as well as on its cultural prestige.

3.4. Language is bound to social strata.

Societal strata speak language variants like the idiom of educated people, a working class variant, a variant spoken by the rural population. Also subcultures like students, sport fans, frequently develop their specific idioms. The extent of variation, however, depends on the social gradient within a society. While the vertical gradient within a society is a phenomenon rather to be investigated by sociologists, it has frequently also a spatial aspect – like it is with the distinction between urban and rural population speaking different idioms.

3.5. Language often supports national, ethnic and regional identity.

Languages are often symbols of national, ethnic and regional identity. Most nations define themselves primarily by language. A standard language may precede the process of nation building like it was with German or Italian. But it may also follow an already existing national idea like it was with Romanian or develop parallel to the process of nation building, for which Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian and most recently Bosnian and Montenegrin are cases in point. Also for regions standard languages as

well as dialects can be identity markers. A standard language serving as a main marker of regional identity is, e.g., Catalan. Germany's, Austria's or Italy's regions with significant identities are, in contrast, often marked by dialects.

3.6. Minority languages and small standard languages illustrate the spatial relations of language most significantly.

For minority languages and small standard languages it is not easy to persist in a globalizing world. But they profit also from the widespread desire to preserve identities right under these conditions. Even declining languages expand in symbolic representation like on signposts and on maps. This refers, e.g., to Frisian in the northern Netherlands or Scottish-Gaelic in Scotland, which are symbolically represented in a much wider area than where they are actually spoken today. Other examples in this context are the Valcanale in Italy styling itself a multicultural region by representing symbolically its four languages (Italian, Friulian, Slovene and German) even on traffic signs, Kashubia cultivating again a minority language not so different from Polish, the Saami regions in the North of Scandinavia reminding the visitor mainly by bi- and multilingual (in the dominant and sometimes more than one Saami language) signposts of their existence, the Sorabians in Germany's Saxonia and Brandenburg symbolically well-represented even by street names and even the Brittons profiting in spite of France's official civic nation policy from a bottom-up movement resulting in bilingual street names e.g. in Rennes. Regionally dominant languages receive further support to underline regional identities as it is with Catalan or Galego. Phenomena like these are closely related to society, space and history and need a.o. also a geographical approach.

3.7. Place names

With place names it is obvious that they relate language to space. But from a cultural-geographical perspective this relation can be described more precisely by highlighting four mainstreams of this relation (see also JORDAN, 2012). Firstly, place names are keys to cultural and settlement history (of a certain region). They tell us something about the cultural, social and economic constitution of the name-giving community, allow conclusions on it. Every name is meaningful and has been assigned to a feature based on a certain motivation. The name lets us know, how the name givers have perceived their environment and what in it was remarkable for them. Place names are condensed narratives about the name-giving community, on its environment as well as on the relation between both of them. Currently used names are frequently derived from older layers of the language spoken today or even from a different language spoken earlier at the same place. Place names have in this way also a function like fossils in biology (ILIEVSKI, 1988): They allow to reconstruct, which language was spoken at a certain place and time and who the community using this language was.

Secondly, place names mark one's own territory. Place names attributed by a person or a human community to a certain feature (in toponomastics titled *endonyms*³) mark symbolically like flags, coats of arms or logos geographical features regarded as

³ See JORDAN 2011.

being in possession of this person or community or at least as features, for which this person or community feels to be responsible. „These names refer to the land of which we are the owners, and to the mountain that fills our horizon, and the river from which we draw the water to irrigate our fields and the village or town in which we have been born and which we love above all others, and the county, country and states, in which we live out our communal lives.“ (COROMINES, 1965, p. 7). Place names help in this way to mark territories, to refer the identity of a person or a community to a section of space, to turn space into place (WATT 2009, p. 21). This is achieved by presenting place names in public space or in publications (like maps). A marking of this kind occurs on all organisational levels of human society and in all spatial scales starting from nameplates at the doors of our workplace, continuing with signposts in front of villages and communes and ending up with signposts at country borders.

Thirdly, place names structure geographical space mentally by making space-related concepts communicable. This becomes especially obvious with names of regions and cultural landscapes. They are always just mental constructs and there is nothing like a ‘region by nature’. Where Europe ends in the East, where the boundaries of a ‘Central Europe’ run is just the result of a convention. Landscape and regional concepts are mental constructs marked by a name. Only the name enables communication on it. And by communicating space-related concepts we structure space mentally. It is true that some (even many) concepts of regions and landscapes are supported by administrative boundaries or natural barriers like mountain ranges or rivers, but others are indeed pure mental constructs – like Salzkammergut, Dalmatia [Dalmacija], Transylvania [Ardeal] or Silesia [Śląsk]. They are nevertheless rich in content, deeply rooted in the consciousness of its inhabitants as well as of the outside world. Some function also as tourism brands and are commercially used by enterprises, music groups and newspapers exploiting their prestige. Nobody would say that this region or landscape does not exist. But it exists in fact just by its name.

Fourthly, place names support the emotional relation between man and place. This is primarily true for persons familiar with the place, i.e. inhabitants; persons, who were born and socialised in a certain place, but left it later without losing their relation to it; or persons, who developed a relation to a certain place only later in their life (like frequent vacationers). When they use the name, hear or memorize it, all their imagination of this place develops in their mind – not only its visual appearance, but also the memories of persons, events, sounds and smells connected with this place. This capacity of place names to support emotional relations between man and place can also be seen with emigrants to overseas in the colonial period, who frequently took the name of their home with them – as a last tie to their former home or to make the new place more familiar.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Spatial relations of language are a research field, which at least in German-speaking geography played so far only a marginal role. The small attention it receives contrasts with the rich variety of tasks exceeding by far the study of language distribution (very often conceived as the exclusive task geographers would have in this field). The research field could also comprise

- the relation between language and cultural space;
- language change, the rise and fall of languages as temporal as well as spatial processes;
- the spatial relation of different language functions like dialect, standard language, official language, military language, ecclesiastical language, trade or educational language;
- the socio-spatial stratification of languages;
- language as a characteristic of national, ethnic and regional identities;
- the specific spatial conditions of minority languages and small standard languages;
- geographical names.

To a Europe that recognizes cultural and linguistic variety as one of its identity features and undertakes many efforts to preserve it, language geography in a comprehensive sense has a lot to contribute.

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