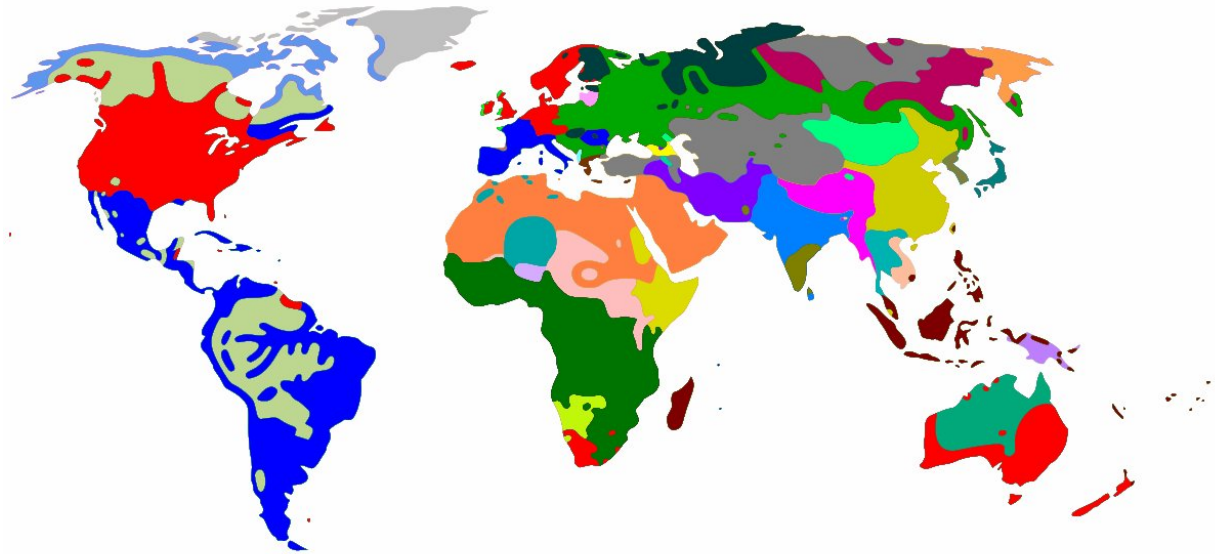


Don't assume language or dialect is locked to a particular place

August 29 2018, by Khawla Badwan



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In an age of globalisation with unprecedented levels of mobility and communication, the world is often described as a "global village". But this metaphor has implications for how we understand the geographical place around us.

There are clearly emotional meanings connected to the concept of place. An expression such as "do you want to come to my place?" refers to place as a space we own and belong to. When we refer to someone

feeling "out of place", we're usually referring to their lack of ability to fit in or adjust.

But place has a national meaning, too. Our national ideologies are reinforced every day by little reminders and signals – for example, when we're reminded of our geographical location by looking at the map on a weather forecast or when football commentators refer to "we" when commenting on their home team.

This is something the social psychologist Michael Billig called "[banal nationalism](#)". These little reminders reproduce a national ideology that links a geographical place with an imagined community called a nation – be that France, England or Germany. Because nation states have been a common political structure in Europe since before World War I, place has historically been associated with the geopolitical borders between countries and is now firmly linked to nationality and citizenship of a particular country.

It's because of this that connections have tended to be made between nations and their languages. Back in 1794, during the French revolution, Bertrand Barère, a prominent member of the National Convention [said that](#): "For a free people the [language](#) must be one and the same for all." A similar message was found in a [1919 letter](#) by the American president, Theodore Roosevelt, who said: "We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language."

Many nationalists believe that a nation state should ideally be a monolingual entity. The "one language one nation" ideology underpins loyalty to an "imagined, homogeneous" nation and subsumes a rather monolithic cultural and linguistic life.

A more recent example was the call by the UK government's former integration tsar, Louise Casey, to [set a deadline](#) by which everybody in

the UK should speak English. While English is of course important for communication and relationship building, such a proposal ignores the multilingualism and hyper-diversity that characterise urban centres in the UK.

Dissecting a dialect map

In a recent small-scale experiment on the relationship between geographical place and language, I asked a group of 15 university students in a major British city from different linguistic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds to comment on what a [dialect](#) map of the city where they were studying told them about themselves.

Dialect maps establish a link between a dialect and place in a way that reinforces a monolithic ideology of language. They rarely acknowledge the multilingual repertoires of people who live in those places. So, for example, if you live in Yorkshire, that doesn't mean that you are necessarily a speaker of Yorkshire English. You may have grown up in a different part of the country with a different dialect, or have learned English as a second language, or lived in different parts of the world before settling in Yorkshire. The possibilities of individual trajectories are endless and they inevitably impact the way we speak.

I asked the students two main questions. First, what does the dialect map tell them about themselves? Second, how do they understand the relationship between language and place?

The majority of the group didn't speak any of the dialects associated with the parts of the city where they were living – a representation of the diversity of the student body in the city. In fact, there were only two students who found the dialect map representative of the linguistic "voice" of the areas of the city where they were currently living.

I asked them how they would represent the connection between the city they "shared" as students and the languages and dialects they spoke. Almost all of them agreed that in an age of unprecedented levels of mobility, any language and any dialect can be spoken anywhere around the world. They blew apart the traditional assumption that a particular dialect or linguistic variety is linked to a particular place.

This has implications for social justice and social cohesion. By departing from traditional views that lock language or dialect in a particular place, we can start to treat linguistic diversity as the norm that it is, rather than the exception. Doing so fosters hospitality and acceptance of difference rather than hostility and fear of diversity. By assuming there is no one "normal" way of speaking, we become more welcoming, accepting and open to learning and sharing our place in the global village.

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