Language Attitudes

Olena Shcherbakova

Overview

Attitudes towards different languages

- Definition
- Complexity debate
- Case study: nominal and verbal complexity

Attitudes towards variation in languages

- Standard language
- Sources of variation
  - ➢ us vs them
  - spelling and punctuation
  - pronunciation
  - lexicon
  - grammar
  - ➢ me: now vs me: then
  - multiple ways of doing the right thing

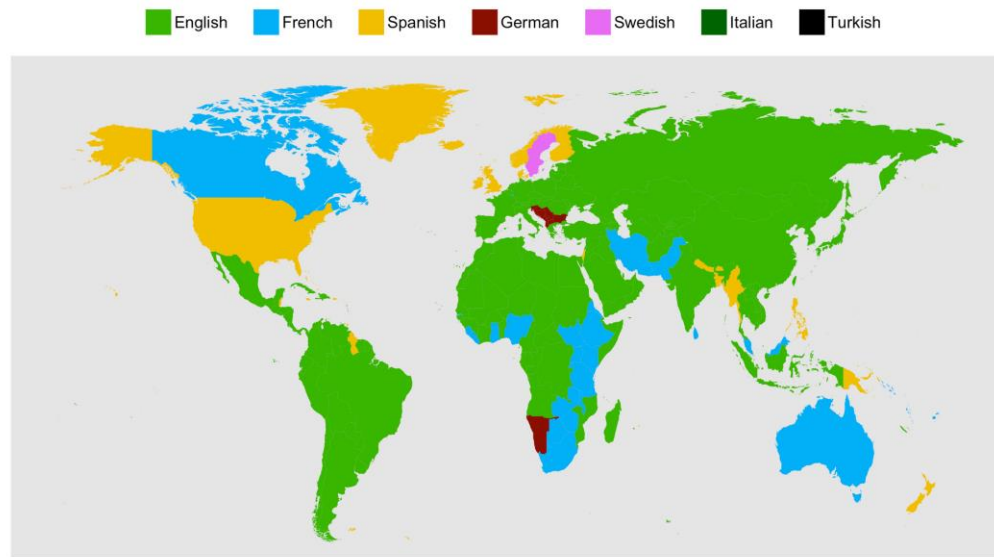# Language attitudes towards different languages
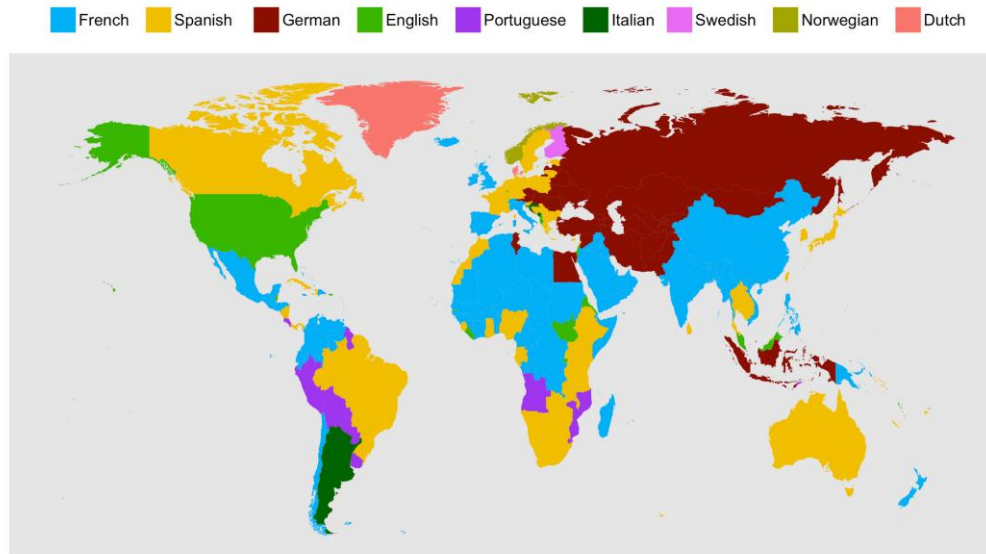
SUMMER
SCHOOL
2021
Doorway to
Human
History

What are language attitudes?

The most popular language studied on Duolingo in each country

The second most popular language studied on Duolingo in each country

SUMMER
SCHOOL
2021
Doorway to
Human
History

Story time

- "Young man, why would you want to learn Language X? It's *the language of housewives.* Learn Language Y instead, *the language of the future.*"

Language attitudes

Language of the future?

Language of housewives?

Language attitudes

- "The study of what people think about different linguistic *varieties* and how those perceptions about language relate to perceptions of attitudes about different users of language" (Meyerhoff 2018: 63).

- *Variety = language/dialect*: "Relatively neutral term used to refer to languages and dialects. Avoids the problem of drawing a distinction between the two, and avoids negative attitudes often attached to the term dialect" (Meyerhoff 2018: 32).
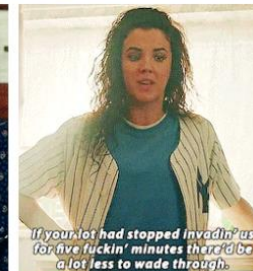
Negative attitudes towards German dialects

- 🟦 absurd gobbledygook
- 🟥 funny dialect
- 🟨 dreadful dialect
- 🟩 passive-agressive dialect
- ⬛ almost normal German

Attitudes towards language users and their language

Attitudes towards language users and their language

- Housing discrimination: "landlords discriminate against prospective tenants on the basis of the sound of their voice during telephone conversations" (Purnell et al. 1999)

Language attitudes

Understanding human history and identifying processes that shaped linguistic diversity and languages used nowadays

→ Understanding how past events shaped our current attitudes towards:

- languages, dialects, and their speakers

- variation in language use

Complexity debate

Stages of complexity debate

Time period	Prevailing idea
19th century – first half of 20th century	Languages differ in their complexity
Second half of 20th century	All languages are equally complex
Two last decades	Languages differ in their complexity

Joseph & Newmeyer 2012

Stages of complexity debate

1) Languages differ in their complexity

➢ complexity = superiority

➢ "primitive" people speak "primitive languages"

Differences in complexity represent:

- different levels of civilization/cultural advancement (?)
- type of culture (emphasizing the concrete (Arabic and Semitic languages) vs the abstract (Greek); ideas (Chinese) vs human thought (Sanskrit and Greek))
- stages and direction of historical development: simplicity → complexity (Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit) or complexity → simplicity (Chinese)

Joseph & Newmeyer 2012

SUMMER
SCHOOL
2021   Doorway to
Human
History

Stages of complexity debate

1) Languages differ in their complexity

Simple: clear transparent	Complex: elaborate consisting of multiple connected parts
Simple: primitive unsophisticated	Complex: obscure difficult

Stages of complexity debate

2) All languages are equally complex

➢ There are no "primitive" languages
- ▪ Humanism: All humans are equal, and all languages are equal
- ▪ Communication: the needs of speakers and hearers have to be met

➢ Complexity in one part of grammar is balanced out by simplicity in another (trade-off hypothesis)

Joseph & Newmeyer 2012

Stages of complexity debate

2) All languages are equally complex

In retrospect, this view:

- hindered the study of language complexity
- oversimplified the processes of language change (complexity had to be necessarily compensated for)

Joseph & Newmeyer 2012
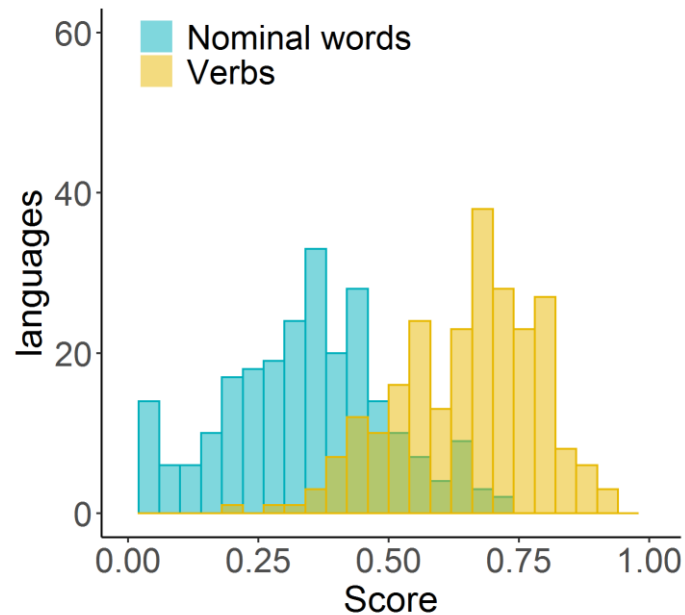
Stages of complexity debate

3) Languages do differ in their relative complexity

➢ detachment from "complexity = superiority"

➢ no language is "primitive"

➢ complexity in one part of grammar is not necessarily balanced out by simplicity in another, but the cases of compensation "trade-offs" have also been established, e.g. between case marking and word order (Sinnemäki 2020)

➢ a range of language-external factors has been proposed to influence grammatical complexity, such as population size (e.g. Trudgill 2011)
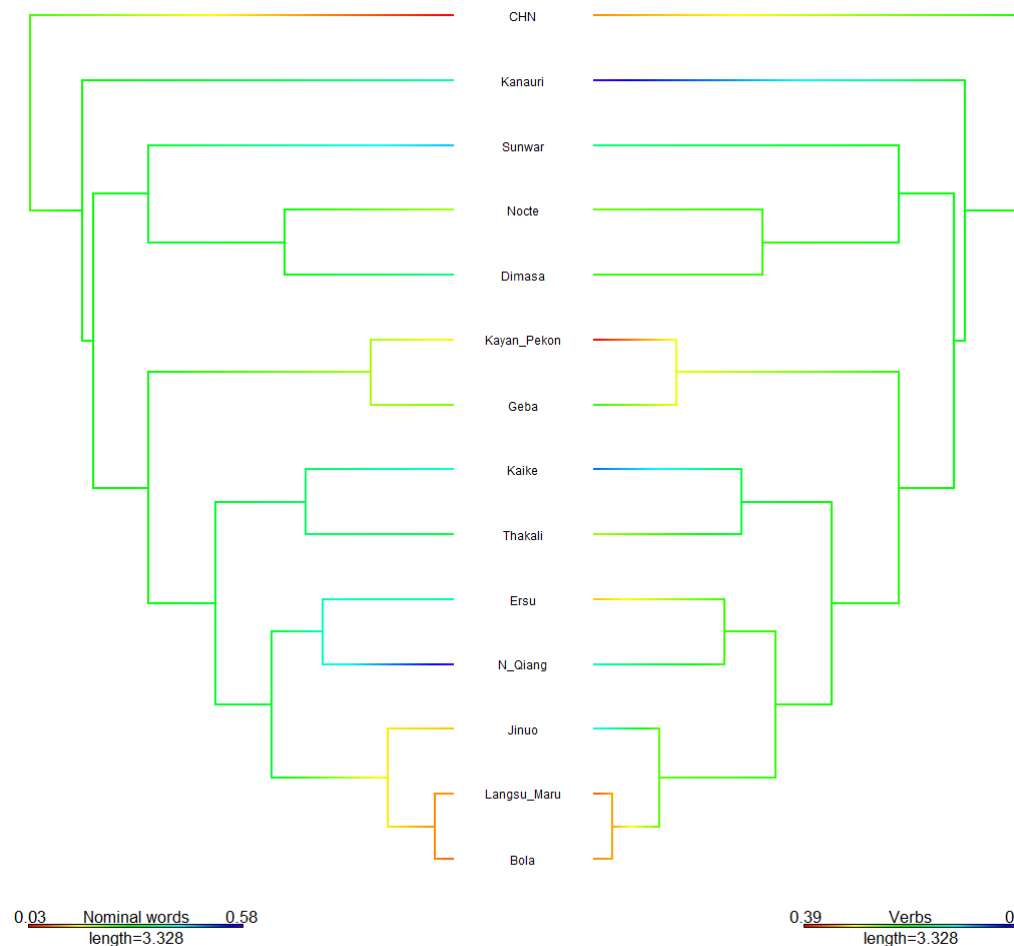
Joseph & Newmeyer 2012

Case study: nominal vs verbal complexity

Shcherbakova et al. (submitted)

CHN
Kanauri
Sunwar
Nocte
Dimasa
Kayan_Pekon
Geba
Kaike
Thakali
Ersu
N_Qiang
Jinuo
Langsu_Maru
Bola

Positive correlation (r = 0.5)

14 Sino-Tibetan languages
(Zhang et al. 2020)

0.03   Nominal words   0.58
length=3.328

0.39   Verbs   0.8
length=3.328

Shcherbakova et al. (submitted)

Albanian_G
Greek_Mod
Ancient_Greek
Russian
Polish
Czech
French
Latin
Irish_A
Icelandic_ST
Faroese
English_ST
Kashmiri
Oriya
Marathi
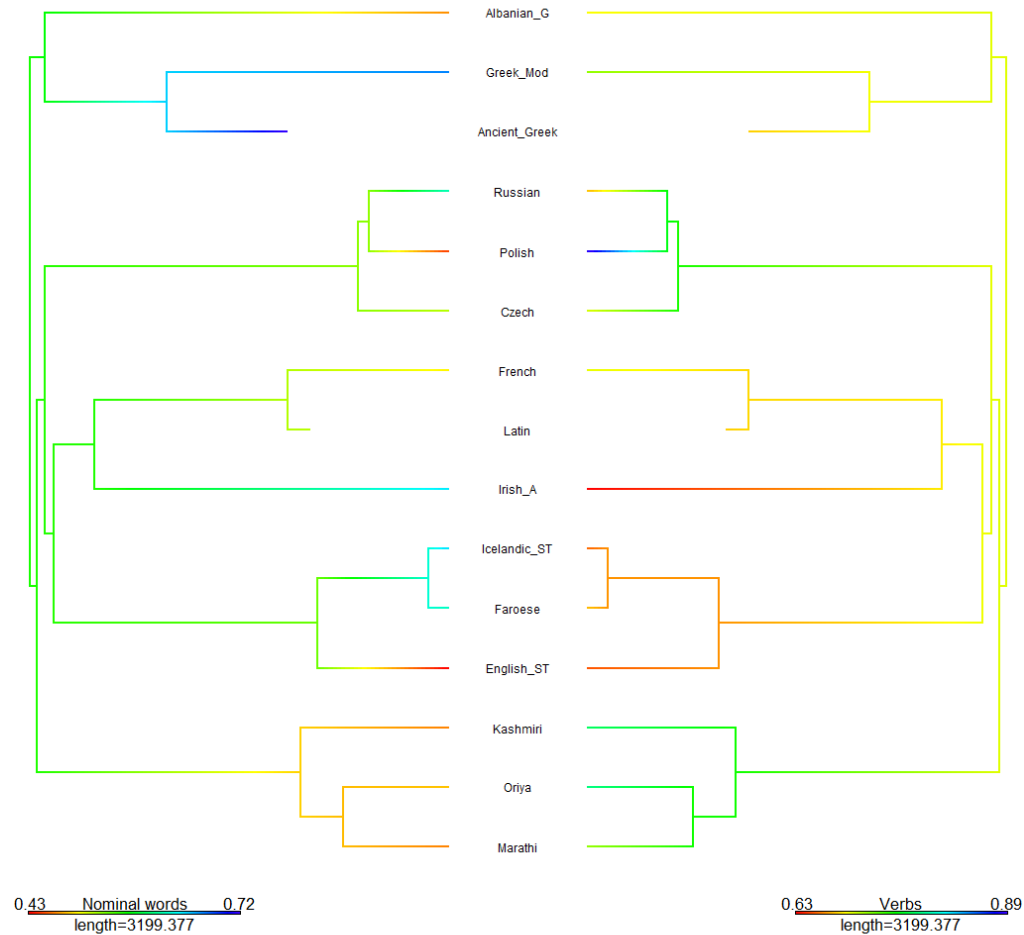
Negative correlation (r = -0.58)

15 Indo-European languages
(Bouckaert et al. 2012)

0.43   Nominal words   0.72
length=3199.377

0.63   Verbs   0.89
length=3199.377

Shcherbakova et al. (submitted)

Case study summary

➢ Languages do differ in their levels of complexity: levels of nominal and verbal complexity in different languages are not the same

➢ Patterns of change in complexity levels are family-dependent; no cross-linguistic tendencies have been established

SUMMER
SCHOOL
2021

Doorway to
Human
History

Attitudes towards variation in languages

Standard language

- "a set of norms that are shared across many localities and which have acquired their own social meaning"
- associated with education
- enjoys high social value

Meyerhoff 2018: 18

Standard language ≠ best language

- there are no better or worse languages/dialects

- standard language has higher social value

- standard language represents the most appropriate option ("a safe bet") in formal settings or where you are not sure that your interlocutor will understand you
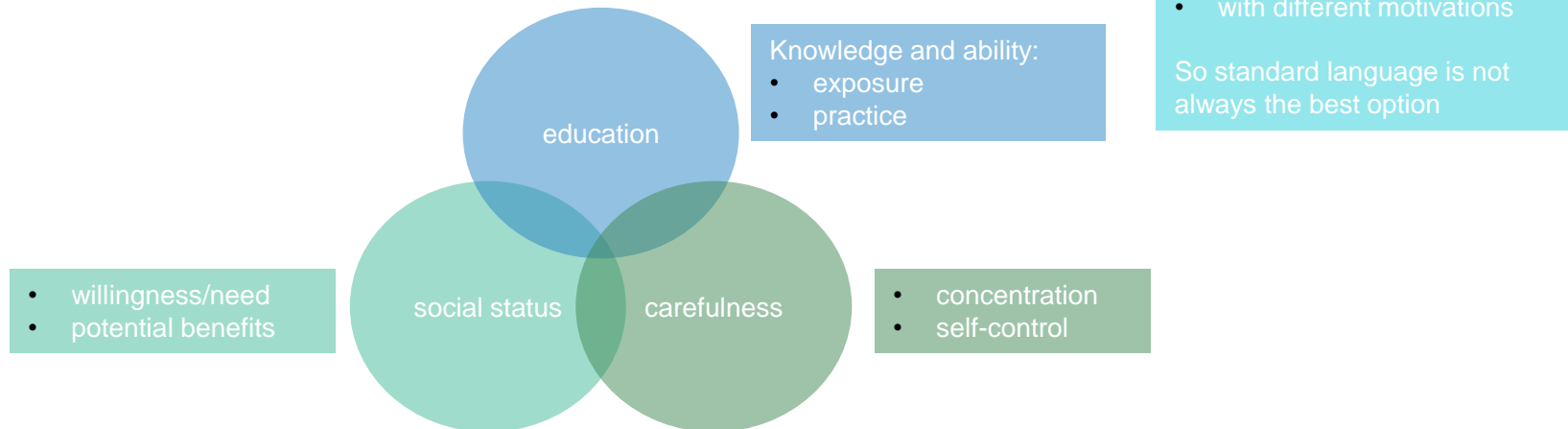
Standardisation

"The process of standardisation involves a community of speakers converging on a shared sense that some forms (spoken or written) are valued more than others and are therefore more appropriate in situations where people are speaking carefully and the exercise of social power is relevant – for example, in law courts, schools, funeral services, and so forth" (Meyerhoff 2018: 18).
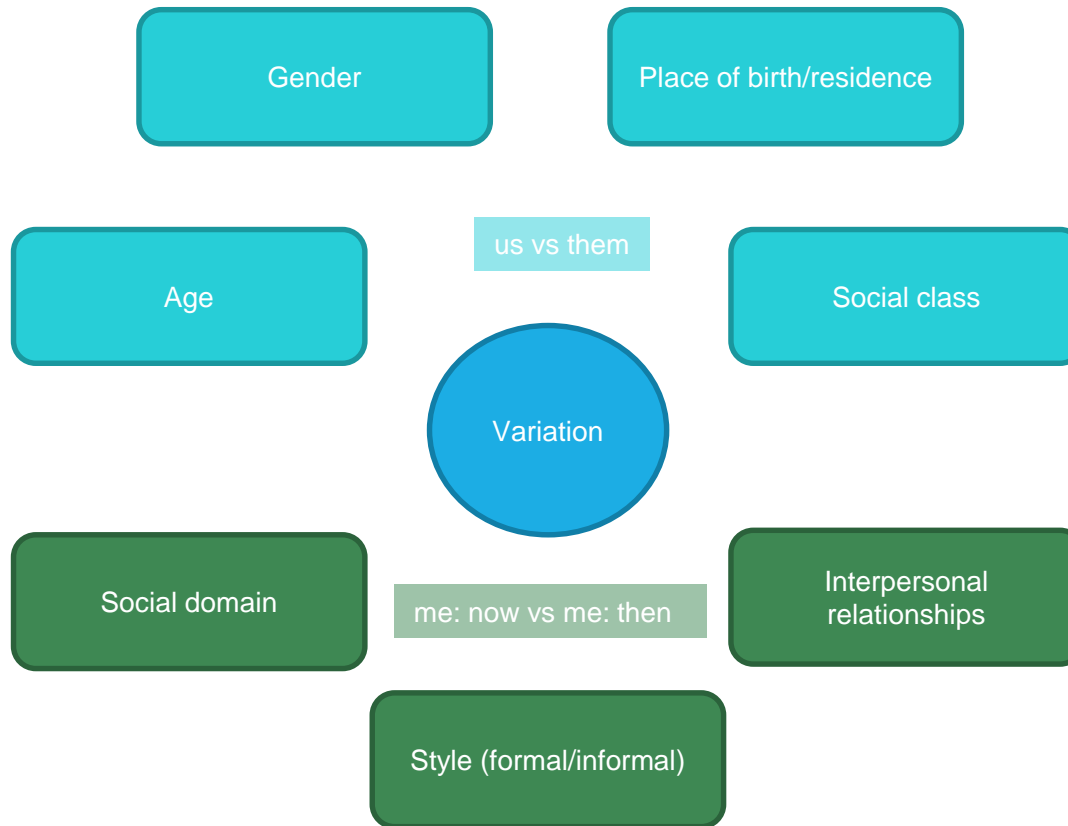
Standard language

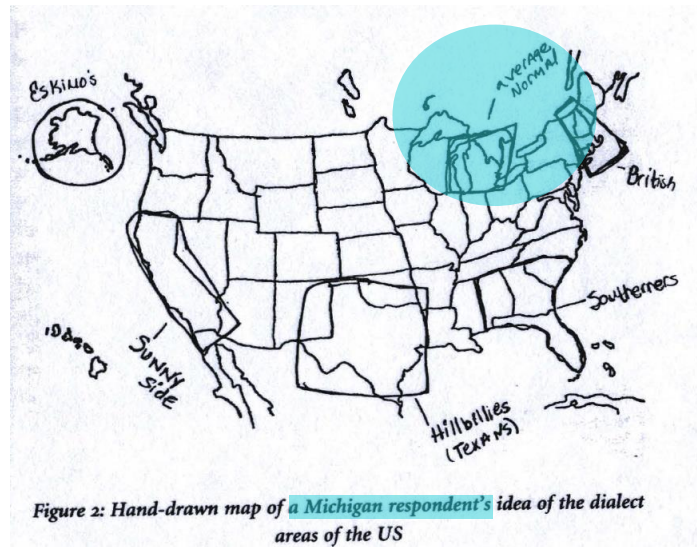Why don't people use standard language all the time?

Language is used:
- in different social contexts
- with different motivations

So standard language is not always the best option

Knowledge and ability:
- exposure
- practice

education

social status

carefulness

- willingness/need
- potential benefits

- concentration
- self-control

Meyerhoff 2018: 18

Gender

Place of birth/residence

us vs them

Age

Social class

Variation

Social domain

me: now vs me: then

Interpersonal relationships

Style (formal/informal)

Meyerhoff 2018

us vs them

- More favorable perception of in-group members than out-group members

Figure 2: Hand-drawn map of a Michigan respondent's idea of the dialect areas of the US

Preston (1998: 143)

Linguistic insecurity

- speakers' feeling that the language they use is somehow inferior, ugly or bad

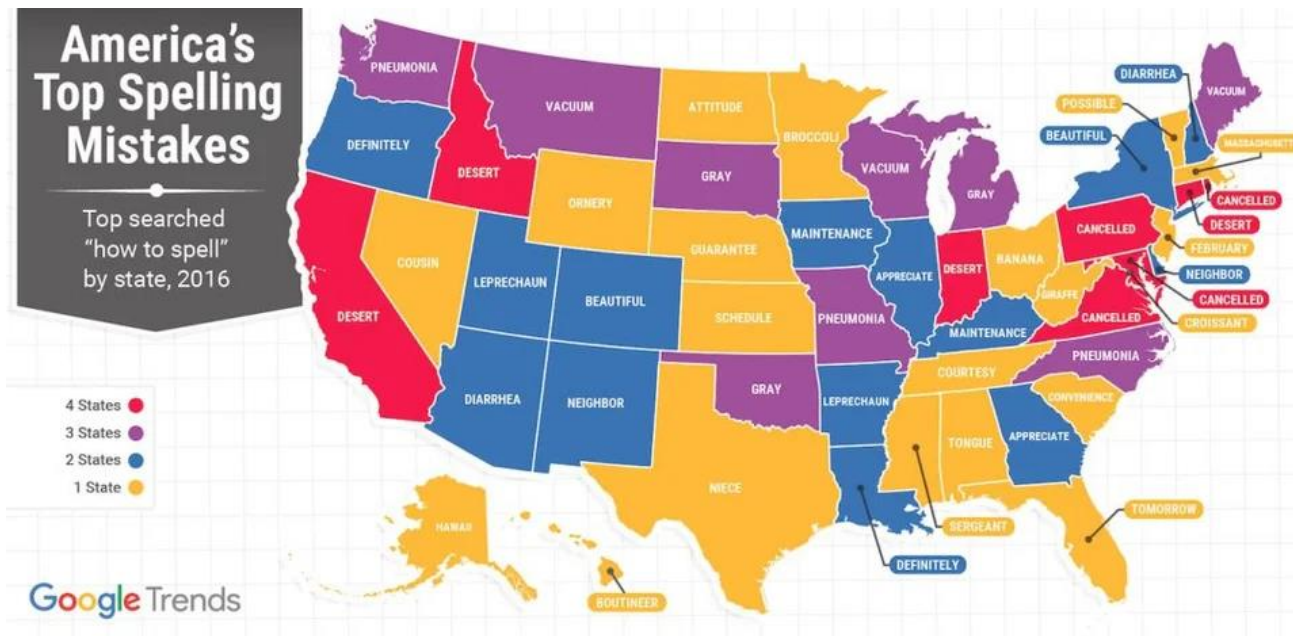- negative attitudes to one's own variety

Meyerhoff 2018

us vs them

- Spelling and punctuation
- Pronunciation
- Lexicon
- Grammar

Spelling

America's Top Spelling Mistakes — Top searched "how to spell" by state, 2016. Google Trends.
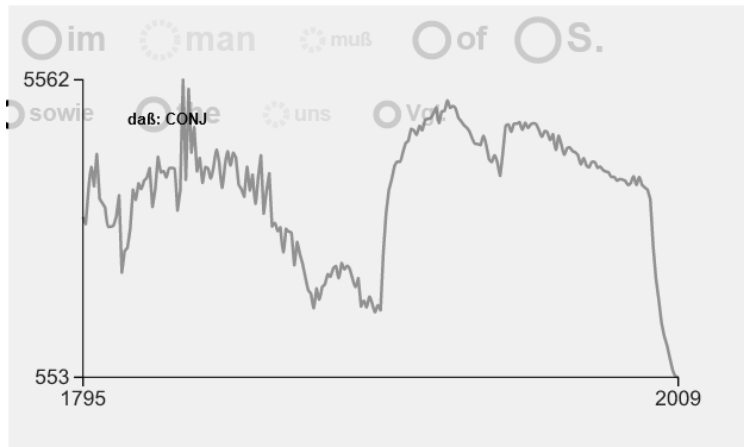
gray vs grey

us vs them: place of birth or residence

Spelling: Language reforms

daß

dass

Punctuation

DTH Opinion
@dthopinion

POLL: What are your thoughts on the Oxford comma?

I'm for it — 80.7%

I'm against it — 19.3%

388 votes · Final results

6:20 PM · Feb 23, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

us vs them:
- education
- following a specific style guide
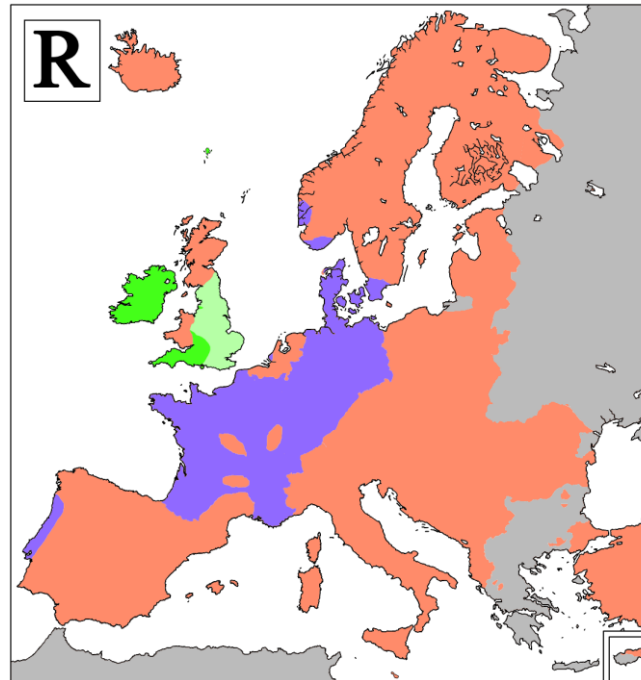
Punctuation

INSIDER

HOME > EDUCATION

The Oxford Comma Is Extremely Overrated

Gus Lubin Sep 21, 2013, 12:24 AM

	Oxford comma	No Oxford comma
Clear	We invited the strippers, JFK, and Stalin.	We invited the strippers, JFK and Stalin.
Ambiguous	We invited the stripper, JFK, and Stalin.	We invited the stripper, JFK and Stalin.

SUMMER SCHOOL 2021 Doorway to Human History

Pronunciation

The pronounciation of the letter "r" has more to do with your local accent than the language you're speaking.

[ɾ/r] In Latin, "r" was rolled, and in these regions it still is. Many dialects roll the "r" once (called a flap) all the time, or when speaking quickly. However, in Spanish, the two sounds are thought of as distinct.

[ʀ/ʁ] In some dialects, the "r" is a more rough, guttural sound. This is most commonly heard in "high" French and German, but there are many French and German dialects that roll their r's, and many areas in other countries that now have a guttural "r".

[ɹ] In most areas of England and Ireland, "r" is neither rolled nor flapped. In some of these areas (light green), the "r" sound is lost after a vowel, but in others (darker green) it is kept.

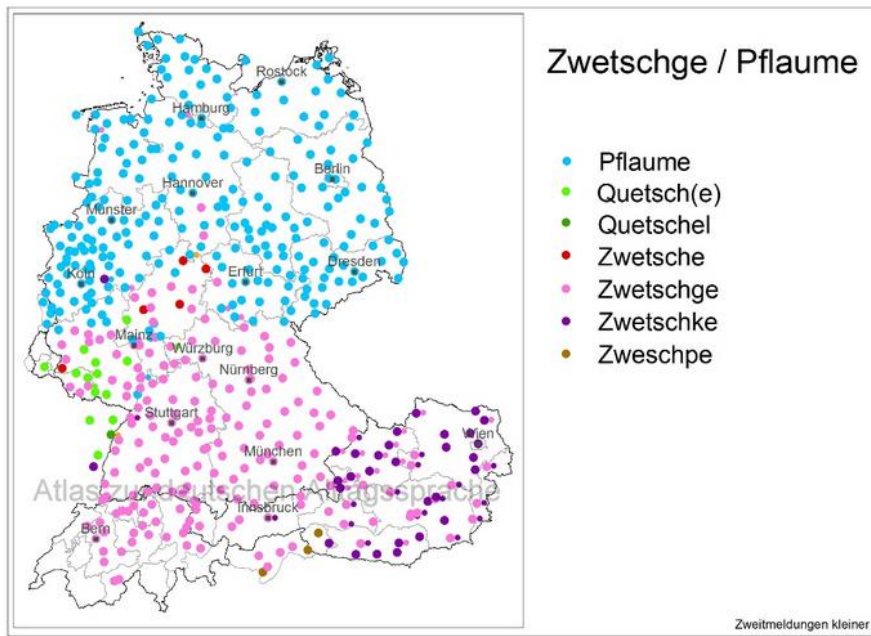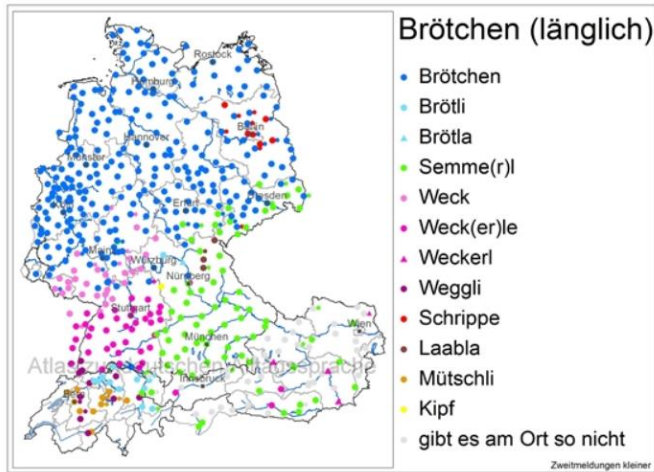us vs them: place of birth or residence

Lexicon

Zwetschge / Pflaume

- Pflaume
- Quetsch(e)
- Quetschel
- Zwetsche
- Zwetschge
- Zwetschke
- Zweschpe

Zweitmeldungen kleiner

Atlas zur deutschen Alltagssprache
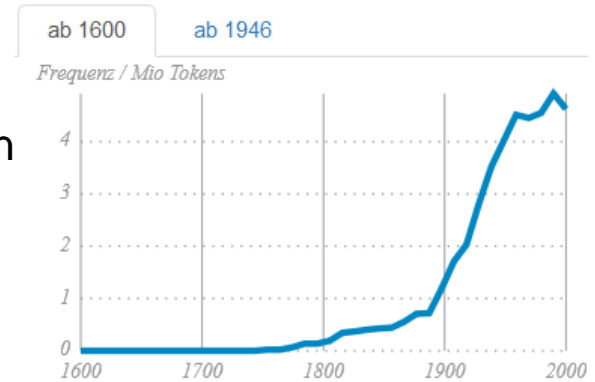

Foto: Ruth Rudolf / pixelio.de

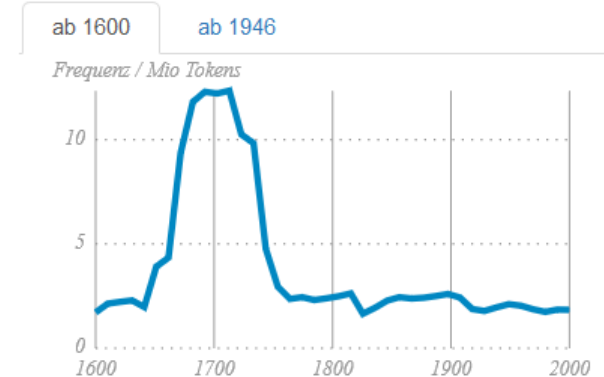# Lexicon

Brötchen/Semmel/Weckli/... (länglich) (Frage 1h)

Foto: Michael Mertes / pixelio.de

Brötchen

Semmel

Lexicon
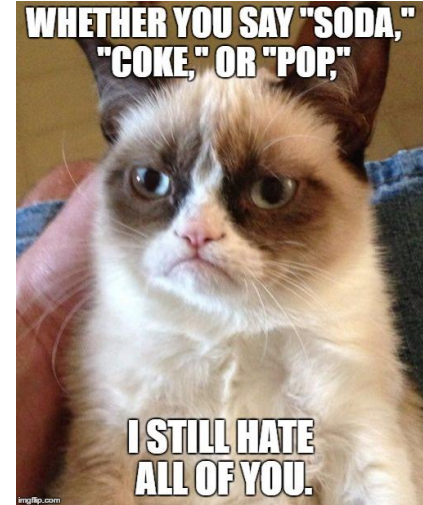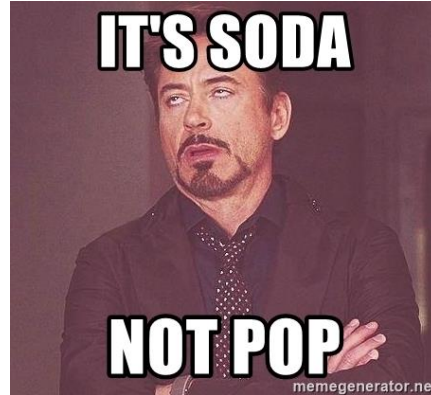
Lexicon

What is your generic term for a sweetened, carbonated beverage?
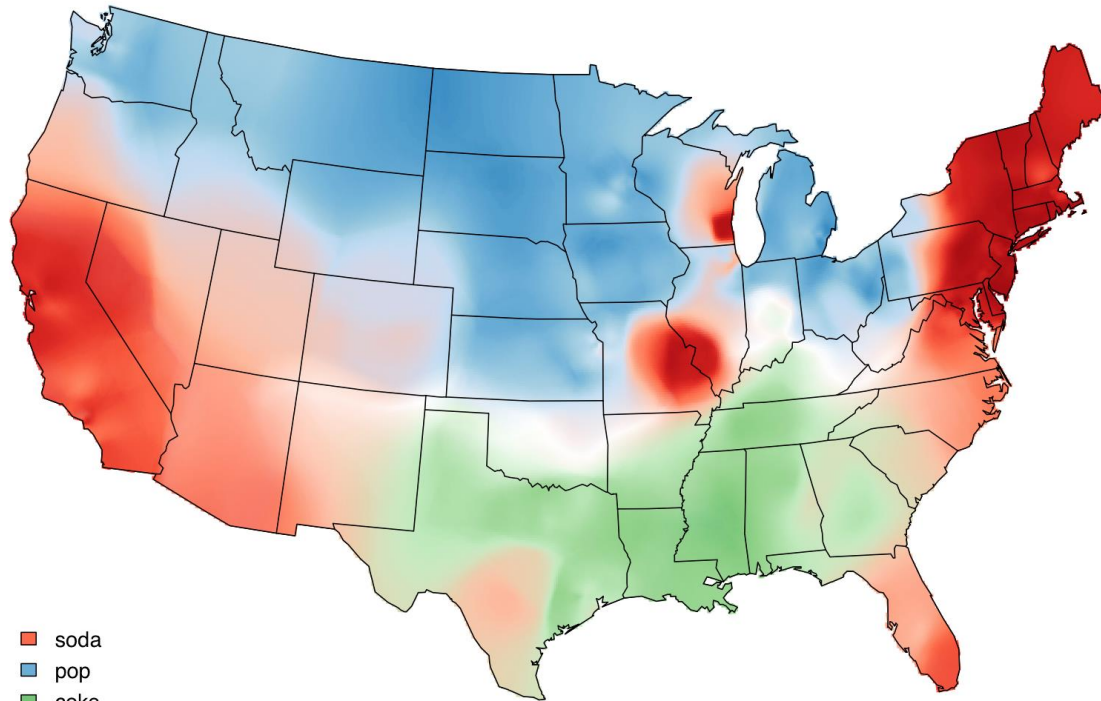
■ soda
■ pop
■ coke

Map by Joshua Katz, Department of Statistics, NC State University
Based on survey data from Bert Vaux, Department of Linguistics, University of Cambridge

us vs them:
place of birth or
residence

SUMMER
SCHOOL
2021 Doorway to
Human
History

Grammar

Der?

Die?

Das?

us vs them:
following one of the
possible rules

SUMMER
SCHOOL
2021
Doorway to
Human
History

Grammar

„Ganz einfach: DER Brotaufstrich, DIE Nuss-Nougat-Creme und DAS leckerste Frühstück! nutella ist ein im Markenregister eingetragenes Fantasiewort. Entscheide also selbst, welchen Artikel du vor nutella setzt."

Grammar

Uhrzeit: 10.15

Uhrzeit: 10:15

- viertel nach zehn
- viertel elf
- viertel ab zehn
- viertel über zehn

Atlas zur Alltagssprache

Zweitmeldungen kleiner

us vs them: place of birth or residence

„VIERTEL VOR 3" oder „DREIVIERTEL 3"
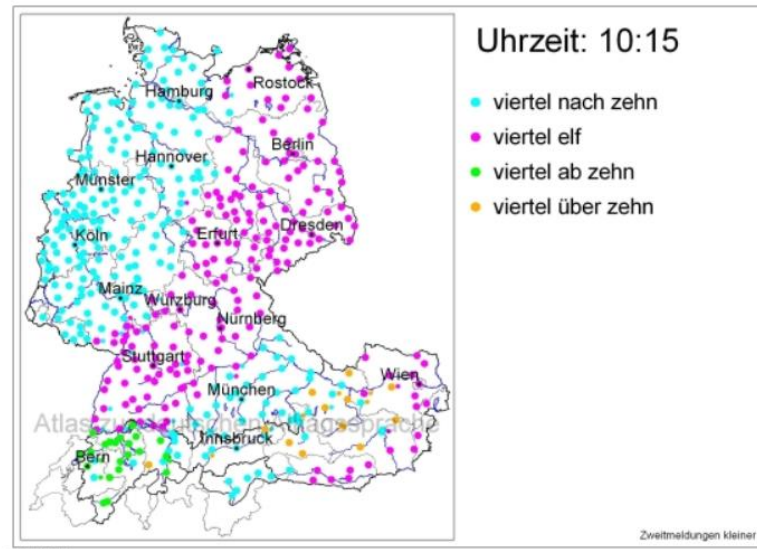
Grammar

Québécois French:

- the rise of one type of future tense (*je parlerai)* at the expanse of another (*je vais parler)*
- some people belonging to higher social class and having higher levels of education go against the flow and keep using (*je vais parler)* more frequently (Wagner & Sankoff 2011)

je	parler**ai**
tu	parler**as**
il/elle/on	parler**a**
nous	parler**ons**
vous	parler**ez**
ils/elles	parler**ont**

je	**vais** parler
tu	**vas** parler
il/elle/on	**va** parler
nous	**allons** parler
vous	**allez** parler
ils/elles	**vont** parler

us vs them:
- education
- social status

Gender

Place of birth/residence

us vs them

Age

Social class

Variation

Social domain

me: now vs me: then

Interpersonal relationships

Style (formal/informal)

Meyerhoff 2018

me: now vs me: then

SUMMER
SCHOOL
2021
Doorway to
Human
History
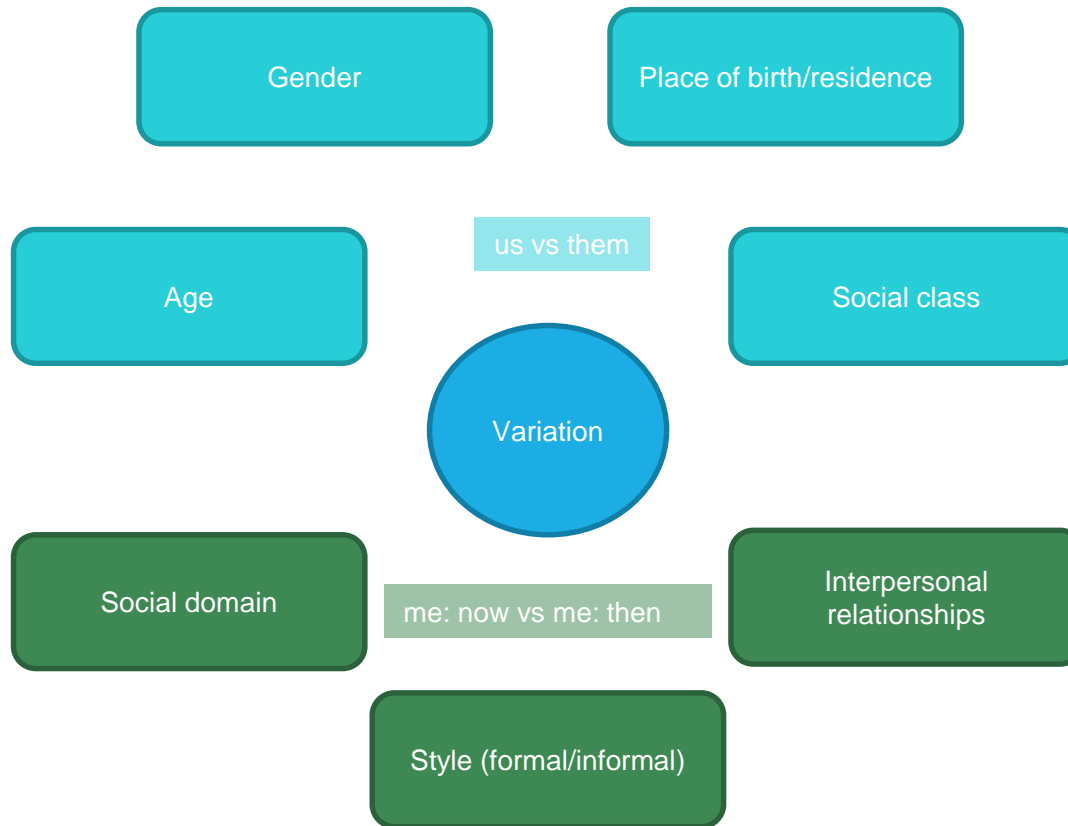
me: now vs me: then

- Exposure to different varieties
- Opportunities to practice using them
- Willingness/need to use them

Doing the right thing

"When I did the interview, I made sure to use a lot of words like 'reprehensible' and 'dichotomy'. They perked right up."

BBC Version

Dear Miss McGovern,
I am a trustee for Teesside Dementia Link Services, we are a small grass roots charity based in Stockton. Dementia is our passion, we want to help as many people as possible with the condition. The charity has been going for more than 4 years now and rose after a major funding loss left over 400 carers with out support. We really could do with a bit of a boost.

As a business and financial expert you will understand how the economy of Teesside has suffered over many years, as part of our mission to support carers and People with Dementia in our area, we also want to support local businesses too, almost every penny we raise is spent supporting our local economy, buying supplies and services as close to home as we can. We like many other areas suffer from larger corporate organisations talking money from our local economy and not offering much in the way support or services, and certainly not supporting our local economy.

You clearly are very busy, but if you can offer us any help we would be very grateful. The sort of think we were thinking was maybe support a fundraising event by encouraging people to donate, or be our president, many charities are helped by just being associated with a famous personality. The work would not be too onerous, or often. You can see the work we do from very limited resources here www.tdls2016.org and here www.facebook.com/tdls2016/. We do hope you have the time and are able to help.

Very best wishes
Mark Walker
Trustee

Steph McGovern ✔
@StephLunch

Like all TV folk I get lots of charity requests — this one from @LinkDementia has made me+my mam laugh out loud (for the right reasons). Trustee Mark has sent two versions of an email asking me for help…one written as a 'BBC version' and then another 'Middlesbrough version' 🤣

Middlesbrough version

Hia luv

Hope your ok pet, we need to borra ya for some stuff we would like ya tu elp us with, I am like a volunteer like for a charity like, that looks after old people yu know the ones that cant remember out, Mucky peg ad it, she was barred out the club cos she kept shout n house before the bingo even started. Our Mam said she was putn it on to get free drinks bu ya don't know do ya.

Any way like we saw that woman from larn of duty doin a thing about singin like, and weev got no one posh to tell gadgies about us like. So u sometames talk posh so ja fancy given us a and like. We carnt pay ya as were brasic like, but mad Reg is goin to spain soon so we might be able to ge ya sum duty free stuff like.

We are just fed up wiv gadgies cumin here and like saying elp these and elp these, then just bugger off to that London and just spend it on nowt.

If ya cumin up and want to stay ovea you can stay at our Karens, er blokes "Werkin away" at the minit, she mite ask ya to babysit but the babies great.

Anyway tarar for now let us know pet if you can giv us out

See ya
Fat Mark

Teesside Dementia Link Services
C/O Stockton Parish Church Hall
Stockton High Street
Stockton on Tees

Doing the right thing

- highlighting similarities with groups of people we (would like to) belong to

- emphasizing differences with groups we are not involved with

- staying true to who we are

Language use

in different social contexts (social domain + interpersonal relationships):

- talking to colleagues
- talking to family and friends
- talking to people at different career levels you meet at conferences/workshops/summer schools
- talking to strangers at cafes and supermarkets

- How formal do I have to be?
- Can I use swear words or slang?
- Will this person understand my local dialect?

with different motivations (style):

- persuade
- inform
- impress
- provoke
- kill time

SUMMER SCHOOL 2021 Doorway to Human History

Take-home messages

- No language is better or worse
- Languages do differ in their complexity, but more complex does not mean superior or better
- People tend to have positive attitudes towards forms associated with standard languages, even though most people do not use them all the time
- Standard language is a dialect with high social value
- Doing the right thing communication-wise requires a lot of flexibility

References

Bouckaert, Remco, Philippe Lemey, Michael Dunn, Simon J. Greenhill, Alexander V. Alekseyenko, Alexei J. Drummond, Russell D. Gray, Marc A. Suchard & Quentin D. Atkinson. 2012. Mapping the origins and expansion of the Indo-European language family. *Science*, *337*(6097): 957-960.

Joseph, John E., and Frederick J. Newmeyer. 2012. 'All languages are equally complex'. *Historiographia linguistica* 39: 341-368.

Meyerhoff, Miriam. *Introducing sociolinguistics*. Routledge, 2018.

Preston, Dennis. R. 1998. They speak really bad English down south and in New York City. In L. Bauer & P. Trudgill (Eds.), *Language myths* (pp. 139–149). London, UK: Penguin Books.

Purnell, Thomas, William Idsardi, and John Baugh. 1999. Perceptual and phonetic experiments on American English dialect identification. *Journal of language and social psychology* 18.1: 10-30.

Shcherbakova, Olena, Volker Gast, Damián E. Blasi, Hedvig Skirgård, Russell D. Gray, and Simon J. Greenhill. (submitted) Coevolution of nominal and verbal coding. In "Measuring Language Complexity", eds. Ehret, Katharina, Alice Blumenthal-Dramé, Christian Bentz & Aleksandrs Berdicevskis. Special Issue, Linguistics Vanguard.

Sinnemäki, Kaius. Linguistic system and sociolinguistic environment as competing factors in linguistic variation: A typological approach. *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics* 6.2 (2020).

Trudgill, Peter. *Sociolinguistic typology: Social determinants of linguistic complexity*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Wagner, Suzanne Evans, and Gillian Sankoff. 2011. Age grading in the Montréal French inflected future. *Language Variation and Change* 23.3: 275-313.

Zhang, Hanzhi, Ting Ji, Mark Pagel, and Ruth Mace. 2020. Dated phylogeny suggests early Neolithic origin of Sino-Tibetan languages. Scientific Reports 10 (1): 20792.

Other resources

https://www.owid.de/plus/lc2016/

https://twitter.com/dthopinion/status/1364263925622190080

https://www.businessinsider.com/do-you-need-the-oxford-comma-2013-9

https://i.redd.it/j6gmyzq8vtuz.png

http://www.atlas-alltagssprache.de/r11-f1hg/?child=runde

http://www.atlas-alltagssprache.de/brotchen/?child=runde

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lBLTkgBH0IE&t=2s

https://www.dwds.de/wb/Br%C3%B6tchen

https://www.dwds.de/wb/Semmel

https://www.duden.de/aktuelle_meldungen/Lieber-Konrad-Duden-alles-Gute-zum-Geburtstag

https://de.babbel.com/de/magazine/die-oder-das-nutella

http://www.atlas-alltagssprache.de/runde-7/f11e/

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73GN_H7klRQ

Images

https://blog.duolingo.com/which-countries-study-which-languages-and-what-can-we-learn-from-it/

https://blog.duolingo.com/which-countries-study-which-languages-and-what-can-we-learn-from-it/

https://pixabay.com/photos/future-time-letters-scrabble-2372183/

https://www.vip.de/cms/darum-schliesst-felicity-huffman-ein-desperate-housewives-comeback-aus-4233288.html

https://mapsontheweb.zoom-maps.com/post/170071664546/6-ways-to-divide-germany

https://www.buzzfeed.com/jennaguillaume/derry-girls-netflix

https://littlethings.com/lifestyle/beauty-through-the-ages

https://imgflip.com/i/174ful

http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/3qv1c6

https://memegenerator.net/instance/67200182/street-car-debate-its-soda-not-pop

https://unsplash.com/photos/2hpiy9XuXC4

https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/gallery/2015/aug/20/womens-suede-six-different-looks-in-pictures

https://unsplash.com/photos/4_jhDO54BYg

https://www.lafayettestudentnews.com/blog/2020/10/30/the-queens-gambit-an-ode-to-passion-wisdom-and-femininity/

https://twitter.com/StephLunch/status/1130806527810519041

https://unsplash.com/photos/98MbUldcDJY