

## Understanding Ethnolinguistic Differences: The Roles of Geography and Trade (Dickens, 2022)

Did you know that the word Ketchup is not American? It comes from the Malay word *kichap* referring to fish sauce<sup>1</sup>. This example illustrates how trade between cultures that speak different languages could lead to the adoption of new words<sup>2</sup>.

### One Sentence Summary

Dickens (2022) found that cultural exchange (measured by language similarity) tends to happen in places with high land productivity variation due to frequent trade between neighboring groups.

### Main Findings

The productivity of land is directly related to trade between two ethnic groups. If one group has more fertile land, e.i a more productive land, it could efficiently grow crops while another ethnic group raises cows and sheep through trade both groups would enjoy meat and vegetables. Therefore, differences in land productivity could signal that two neighboring ethnic groups traded with each other.

Once he establishes the connection between land productivity and trade, the author can use the existing link between trade and culture to test whether land productivity affects culture through trade. Using the Ethnologue, the author identifies the borders between ethnolinguistic groups and measures the land productivity around said border using the Caloric Sustainability Index (CSI). He finds that increases in land productivity reduced linguistic distance between two neighboring ethnic groups. In other words, places with high land productivity variation share their culture with other ethnic groups through trade.

### Concluding Remarks

Whenever humans trade, they communicate and, in the meantime, share a bit of their culture. This paper finds evidence that the characteristics of the land play an important role in the transfer of culture as a byproduct of trade.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Chinese word for *bikini* has a similar phonetic sound to the English pronunciation.

<sup>2</sup> There is a large amount of literature showing how trade can change culture.

## References

Dickens, A., 2022. Understanding Ethnolinguistic Differences: The Roles of Geography and Trade. *The Economic Journal* 132, 953–980. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/ueab065>