

The diachrony of language geography: linking small-scale and large-scale perspectives

Convenor: Matthias Urban, CNRS

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Abstracts (max. 300 words, excluding references) should be sent to Matthias Urban (matthias.urban@cns.fr) by the end of November 15th CET

Language geographies differ significantly across the world. Such differences can be observed on local, regional, continental, and global scales. Locally, in many parts of New Guinea, for instance, it is possible to encounter a completely different language each time one walks from one village to the next (Foley 2020). In Europe, this is much less likely; before the development of standardized national languages, the continent was characterized by extensive dialect continua involving principally the Romance, Germanic, and Slavic branches of Indo-European. On the regional scale, Southeast Asia is characterized by a contrast between a poverty of languages in the agriculturalist cities of the valleys and the fluid identities of people in the highlands, which entails a lower allegiance to either one of many individual languages spoken there (Scott 2009). On the continental scale, there are striking skewings in language diversity e.g. in North America: California is hyperdiverse, but east of the Rockies there is a language geography that is notably less exuberant. Finally, globally, the thousands of languages of the world at large are not evenly distributed either: for instance, language diversity levels get less dense the further away one moves to the equator (Mace and Pagel 1995, Nettle 1998).

This workshop aims to explore what historical, sociolinguistic, and environmental factors shape language geographies on lower scales, and how large scale patterns might emerge from such lower-level language ecologies in different environments across the globe.

This workshop aims to serve as a platform that brings together scholars who work from quantitative and qualitative perspectives on the dynamics of language diversity to foster the kind of exchange that is required to tackle these questions. Such interaction is presently too limited.

In keeping with this aim, the workshop invites different types of presentations:

With the goal of obtaining a better comparative view on language ecologies and their diachronic dynamics at local and regional scales, presentations may sketch the characteristics of a specific regional language ecology and explore how it relates to the creation and maintenance of the region's language geography. Presentations dealing with ecologies that have not yet been made as prominent as e.g. the Vaupés are particularly welcome. Such presentations should have a comparative perspective and present case studies involving a set of distinct languages rather than a single one. They should provide an overview of the area concerned; the languages involved; their geographical distribution; describe what the social and economic relations between their speakers are; what language ideologies govern language use (if any); and what effects the regional system in which language use is embedded has on the diachronic trajectory of the involved languages. This may concern the lexicon (e.g. lexical borrowing or the absence thereof); convergence effects, including large-scale readjustments of morphosyntactic organization (e.g. Ross's 1996 „metatypy“), but possibly also divergence effects (Evans 2019) as speakers seek to maintain ideologically relevant linguistic difference. Of interest is also the question whether there is evidence that the observed characteristic language ecology is a long standing stable one that may be projected into the past, and if so what evidence there is in support of such an inference.

Also welcome are presentations that treat particular language geographies on any scale of analysis, including large or even global scales, and that model, either quantitatively or qualitatively, the language dynamics underlying the generation or maintenance of distinctive patterns.

Finally, particularly welcome are studies that link the quantitative analysis of environmental variables and diversity levels to empirically observable linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior and/or diachronic language dynamics of expansion and language shift. Such studies help to understand synchronically observed patterns of language geography through the exploration of the underlying synchronic and diachronic language dynamics.

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