

# Multilingualism and me:

We are more similar than we are different

**Fjöltyngi og ég:** Við erum líkari en við erum ólík

**Flersprogethed og mig:** Vi er mere ens end vi er forskellige

# Languages are vastly different



English

He cut the bread

Mohawk

Wahana'tarakwetare'

Inuktitut

σ◀¤đ›¤▶ ᐅບӻӻԾ▶¤¤

# Languages are vastly different



Urdu

Ukrainian

Greek

Georgian

Armenian

Berber

Amharic

Javanese

کل ہم سب روٹی کھارہ ہے

Ми всі вчора єли хліб

Χθες τρώγαμε όλοι ψωμί

გუშინ ყველანი პურს ვჭამდით

Երեկ բոլորս հաց էինք ուստու  
Ի՞՞Ի՞ օՐՐ Ի՞+Ի՞+Ի՞ օԿՕ:Ը ՀԵ՞Ի՞Ը

ትለንት ሁላትንም ፍብ እየበለን ካበ

ହିନ୍ଦା ହାତ୍ତାଣ୍ଣି ମାତ୍ରାଣ୍ଣି ହନ୍ତାଣ୍ଣି

# Languages are vastly different



Hawaiian

m, n, p, k, ʔ, h, w, l, a, e, i, o, u

Archi

m, n, b, d, d<sup>w</sup>, g, g<sup>w</sup>, p, t, t<sup>w</sup>, k, k<sup>w</sup>, q, q<sup>w</sup>, q<sup>l</sup>,  
q<sup>l<sup>w</sup></sup>, ʔ, ʔ, p:, t:, k:, k<sup>w</sup>:; q:, q<sup>l</sup>:; p', t', k', k<sup>w</sup>', q',  
q<sup>w</sup>', q<sup>l</sup>', q<sup>l<sup>w</sup></sup>', ts, ts<sup>w</sup>, tʃ, tʃ<sup>w</sup>, kʈ, kʈ<sup>w</sup>, ts:, ts', ts<sup>w</sup>',  
tʃ', tʃ<sup>w</sup>', kʈ', kʈ<sup>w</sup>', ts':, tʃ':, s, s<sup>w</sup>, ʃ, ʃ<sup>w</sup>, ʈ, ʈ<sup>w</sup>, X, X<sup>w</sup>,  
X<sup>l</sup>, X<sup>l<sup>w</sup></sup>, h, s:, s<sup>w</sup>:; ʃ:, ʃ<sup>w</sup>:; ʈ:, ʈ<sup>w</sup>:; X:, X<sup>w</sup>:; X<sup>l</sup>:; X<sup>l<sup>w</sup></sup>:; z,  
z<sup>w</sup>, ʒ, ʒ<sup>w</sup>, ɬ, ɬ<sup>w</sup>, ɳ, ɳ<sup>w</sup>, ɳ<sup>l</sup>, ɳ<sup>l<sup>w</sup></sup>, r, H, l, j, w, i, e, a, o, u, ə

# Languages are vastly different



English

**the**

Dutch

**de, het**

French

**le, la, l', les,**

Icelandic

**-nn, -inn, -num, -inum, -ns, -ins, -n, -in, -na,  
-ina, -nni, -inni, -ð, -ið, -nu, -inu, -nir, -nna, -nar**

# Why are languages different?



- We use language to describe the world around us
- Our surroundings shape our language

Icelandic

**skápur**

English

**closet, cabinet, cupboard, wardrobe, locker**

English

**snow**

Iceland

**snjór, snær, fönn, mjöll, hjarn, kafald**

# Languages describe the world around us



- In San Jerónimo Acazulco / Ndöngü, expressing where and how people go is important
- Verbs conjugate for person as well as **direction**

**Drahyüga'mbe**

*dra-hyü-ga-'mbe*  
1P- 3- 1P-PL.EXCL.

**Duhyüga'mbe**

*du- hyü-ga-'mbe*  
1P.CISLOC.-3-1P-PL.EXCL.

‘We are three people’

**Darhyüga'mbe**

*dar- hyü-ga-'mbe*  
1P.TRANSLOC.-3-1P-PL.EXCL.

‘We are 3 who arrive’

‘We are 3 who leave’

# Localized vocabulary



- Languages that are spoken in a very small area have less variation to describe

Acazulco Otomí **xöntho**

English **forest;**  
**mountain**



# Different situations



- We speak differently in different situations
- We choose our way of communication to fit the situation

*Ugh, I'm seriously craving ice cream right now.*

versus

*If there's an opportunity later, I'd appreciate a quick break — I've been really wanting some ice cream.*

# Multilingualism



- Sometimes, different situations require different languages

*Would you like some ice cream?*

**versus**

*Aimeriez-vous de la crème glacée ?*

# Multilingualism can mark identity



# Multilingualism is the human default



- Historically, most humans knew multiple languages or dialects
- Monolingualism is a modern exception
- My students from West Africa often use up to 5 different languages every day for different purposes

Princess Charlotte already speaks two languages at just two-years-old



@HAWNTED



Cole Allen  
 @\_colenewberry

So do most children of immigrants but I guess it's less impressive when they're poor



## **But these vastly different languages have more in common than we are sometimes aware of**

- We are all human → we share the same speech organs and cognitive machinery
- All languages can express anything humans need to express
- Signed and spoken languages convey the same meanings through different but equally complex systems

# We share the same speech organs



## THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET (revised to 2020)

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)

© 2020 IPA

	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal
Plosive	p b			t d		t̪ d̪	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	n̪j		n		ɳ	ɲ	ɳ	N		
Trill	ʙ			r					R		
Tap or Flap		v̪		f̪		t̪					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ɟ	x y	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɺ							
Approximant		v̪		ɹ̪		ɻ̪	j	w̪			
Lateral approximant				l̪		ɺ̪	ɻ̪	ɺ̪			

# Lazy humans



- If we can get away with spending less energy and still succeed, we go for it!
- Languages tend to undergo **reduction**, **lenition**, or **simplification** rather than the opposite.

## *Chronological change*

Latin

[augustus]



French

[u]

## *Different registers*

English

[ai wʊd hæv]



English

[aidəv]

- We spend less energy producing approximants than stops
- Stop sounds require us to build up air pressure
- Approximants only require air to flow freely, no air pressure

## *Chronological change*

Latin      **liber [-b-]**



French      **lliure [-w-]**

## *Different registers: "løbe"*

Danish      **[lø:bə]**



Danish      **[lø:wə]**

# Morphological simplification



Old English

**nominative, accusative, dative, genitive**

Modern English

**nominative, genitive**

Old Church Slavonic

**nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, locative, dative, instrumental**

Bulgarian

**nominative, vocative**

Latin

**nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative, ablative**

French

—

# Multilingualism and empathy



- Across languages, we find lullabies, swear words, love phrases, ways of comforting
- Multilinguals often act as cultural mediators because they know how different languages code and express the same feelings and meanings → friendliness is expressed very differently in Finnish and English, but the underlying feeling is the same.
- Anecdote: My Finnish student's feedback from a summer course

# We are more similar than we are different



- Multilingualism is a lesson: difference is surface-level; our communicative core is shared → just think about the world of dumplings, from **gyoza** to **pierogi** and **ravioli**, they're all filled dough expressed in different ways.
- Studying languages, even very foreign ones, reveals a world full of underlying similarities and shared patterns — just like ourselves as human beings.

háw'aa qujannamiik snachailya hačuu



qaĝaasakung hu sukiłqukni

॥<Δ ॥<Δ

ñeekoo

Pimot

wuujo aasanaláá?

máhsı

quana

iliğanamiik

hąj'

kʷukʷscémxʷ

giáxsixa

kw'as hó:y

miigwech

**thank you**

kwänäschis

gilakas'la merci

‘d̪ləΔ°σ

HÍSWKE

tiawenhk

wela'lioq kinanāskomitin

kwookwshchAyp

čiPíkət sń Pə məkʷ

niá:wen

kukwstuṁckálap

limləmt