

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



Urdu

کل ہم سب روٹی کھا رہے تھے

Ukrainian

Ми всі вчора їли хліб

Greek

Χθες τρώγαμε όλοι ψωμί

Georgian

გუშინ ყველანი პურს ვჭამდით

Armenian

Երեկ բոլորս հաց էինք ուտու

Berber

ⵉⵎⵎⵓ ⵏ ⵓⵎⵎⵓ ⵉⵎⵎⵓ ⵏ ⵓⵎⵎⵓ ⵏ ⵓⵎⵎⵓ ⵏ ⵓⵎⵎⵓ

Amharic

ቅላንቲ ሁላችንም ዳቦ እየበላን ነበር

Javanese

ꦏꦺꦴꦩꦸꦤ꧀ ꦏꦺꦴꦩꦸꦤ꧀ꦠꦸꦭꦺ ꦩꦶꦁꦸꦤ꧀ꦠꦸꦭꦺ ꦠꦸꦭꦺ

Languages are vastly different



Hawaiian m, n, p, k, ʔ, h, w, l, a, e, i, o, u

Archi m, n, b, d, d^w, g, g^w, p, t, t^w, k, k^w, q, q^w, q^ʕ,
q^{ʕw}, ʔ, ʔ, pː, tː, kː, k^wː, qː, q^ʕː, pʻ, tʻ, kʻ, k^wʻ, qʻ,
q^wʻ, q^ʕʻ, q^{ʕw}ʻ, ts, ts^w, tʃ, tʃ^w, kɬ, kɬ^w, tsː, tsʻ, ts^wʻ,
tʃʻ, tʃ^wʻ, kɬʻ, kɬ^wʻ, tsʻː, tʃʻː, s, s^w, ʃ, ʃ^w, ɬ, ɬ^w, χ, χ^w,
χ^ʕ, χ^{ʕw}, h, sː, s^wː, ʃː, ʃ^wː, ɬː, ɬ^wː, χː, χ^wː, χ^ʕː, χ^{wʕ}ː, z,
z^w, ʒ, ʒ^w, ɽ, ʁ, ʁ^w, ʁ^ʕ, ʁ^{ʕw}, r, ɱ, 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.

‘We are three people’

Duhyüga'mbe

du- hyü-ga-'mbe

1P.CISLOC.- **3-** 1P-PL.EXCL.

‘We are 3 who arrive’

Darhyüga'mbe

dar- hyü-ga-'mbe

1P.TRANSLOC.- **3-** 1P-PL.EXCL.

‘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



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		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ		
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ		
Tap or Flap		ⱱ		ɾ		ɽ					
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ							
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ			
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ			

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]

Lenition



- 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 **liure [-w-]**

Different registers: "løbe"

Danish **[løːbə]**



Danish **[løːwə]**

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.



wuujɔ aasanaláá?

wuujɔ aasanaláá?

iliganamiik

kw'as hó:y

kwänäschi

tiawenhk

kwookwshchAyp

kukwstum'ckálap

limlæmt