

# Benedict Anderson's imagined communities

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## 1. Introduction

Benedict Anderson's great work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Anderson 1983; hereafter IC) has been hailed as the "best known single work in nationalism studies" (Breuilly 2016: 625). His work has had an enormous impact throughout the social sciences. Much of Anderson's formulation depends on observations about the importance of linguistics, communication, and standardization of language in community formation and identities. It is therefore paradoxical that few linguists have addressed Anderson's work. Even rarer are discussions of the implications of Anderson's work from the perspective of pragmatics. This essay is an attempt to begin an exploratory discussion of the many pragmatic issues raised by the concept of *Imagined Communities* as laid out in Anderson's important work.

Anderson's work deals with macro-social processes in which societies have changed from local collectives with allegiances to individuals, hierarchical political structures, economic interdependencies or religious affiliations to structures where individuals acquire a collective self-identification that is coterminous with a "nation," an abstraction that may or may not be enclosed within the political boundaries of a state.

Linguists, especially researchers concerned with pragmatics, are also concerned with generalizable behavior, sentiments and ideologies shared by large populations. However, they are also concerned with individual behavior and variability in communicational behavior. In the discussion that follows, I will try to "unpack" the linguistic aspects of Anderson's concept of the imagined community. I conclude that the idea of a "language" as a unifying principle for an imagined community is a widely accepted idealization of a linguistic reality. In fact, "imagined communities" may espouse and revere the idea that its members share a unified language, but in fact they must overlook remarkable linguistic diversity in order to maintain this belief. In short, "imagined communities" also embody "imagined linguistic unity."

## 2. Benedict Anderson's message

Benedict Anderson's theory of the development of nationalism encompasses the world's transition from small-scale to large-scale society. This human transition has been of interest to social scientists for many decades, with many theories as to the

origins of the “invention” of the nation state (Fallers 2011). Anthropologist Ernst Gellner (Gellner 1983) speculated that the origins of the nation-state and other large-scale societal formations lay in the industrial revolution and the economic and trade forces that were thereby unleashed. Gellner’s study was only one of several writings that used a Eurocentric model for theories of the development of nationalism (Hobsbawm 1992; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Baycroft & Hewitson 2006).

As anthropologists Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Ben Anderson point out, there is a common misconception about Anderson’s work. The word “imagined” in Anderson’s title is often read as “imaginary.” Nothing could be more remote from Anderson’s meaning. As they write, Anderson “links ‘invention’ not to fabrication and falsity, but to imagining and creation” (Breuille 2016: 628). As Benedict Anderson states in *IC*:

In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following [6] definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.

(Anderson 1983: 5–6)

One of Anderson’s primary focuses is on the role of language and linguistics in the formation of imagined communities and of nationalism. This is of great interest to research in pragmatics. As I stated above, this aspect of his work has not been sufficiently analyzed.

The transition between face-to-face encounter and broader ideologies of nationalism is mediated through language. Anderson’s theory of national formation focuses on the commodification of language through the mechanism of “print-capitalism,” whereby local communication varieties become standardized, and serve as the basis for the formation of national consciousness. Elliott Green summarizes the ways in which Anderson makes this connection:

Anderson argues that print-capitalism allowed for the birth of national consciousness in three ways: (1) it created simple means of discourse and communication between members of a given ‘language-field’ thereby creating awareness of such fields as actual communities; (2) it standardised languages and thereby allowed future members of the language-field to identify with the past; and (3) it elevated certain languages to print form and not others, thereby prioritising certain language fields.

(Elliott Green in Breuille 2016: 645; Anderson 1983: 44–45)

Of interest to pragmatics is Anderson’s designation of “creole pioneers,” individuals who are instrumental in the creation of national consciousness through the conscious elevation of local language varieties to symbolic national status. (Anderson 1983: 47–66). This process occurs as communities transit to recognized nationhood. As a variety transits from being a “creole” to a recognized “language,” there is no scientifically

verifiable change in formal structure or communication behavior. It is the result of a political process. In short, a variety becomes a “language” serving as a hallmark of community or national identity when some politically recognized body has the authority to declare it so.

### 3. Language and identity

Although Anderson's focus was on the formation of nationalism, his work has far broader implications for pragmatic linguistics. In focusing on “communities,” Anderson opens the discussion to the question of social identity, and for the purposes of this discussion, linguistic identity. As Tabouret-Keller aptly notes: “The language spoken by somebody and his or her identity as a speaker of this language are inseparable: This is surely a piece of knowledge as old as human speech itself. Language acts are acts of identity (Tabouret-Keller 1998: 349).

Certainly, nations qualify as imagined communities by Anderson's definition, but they are only one kind of imagined community. An unpacking of Anderson's insightful analysis presents an enormously complex panoply of human identity formation, only one aspect of which is nationality, and only one factor is the language variety or varieties which a person uses in the course of everyday life. Humans use many symbolic elements to assume a connection with others – even though they have no personal history with those individuals. As Tabouret-Keller states:

[E]mbedded identities ... rest on strictly symbolic means, such as family names, for example, [but] we must not forget that identities may also exploit scopic materials, sensory elements among which visual features seem to occupy a pre-eminent place. (Ibid: 350)

Identities can be thought of metaphorically as a series of Venn diagrams. One belongs to one broad ethnic or religious group that may transcend national boundaries. Then one is a citizen of a state (sometimes more than one). Within national boundaries, one may belong to a regional group, a local group and a vicinity. By refining this “identity map” even further, one's identity can be specified down to those with whom one has an actual face-to-face relationship, at which point the individuals so involved are no longer in an “imagined” relationship with each other.

Even within families there are potential overlapping community identities. One of my acquaintances laid this out for me in the following way:

I have too many identities. My father is from Spain, my mother from France, both Roman Catholics. Her father was German Lutheran, and her mother from a Polish Jewish family. They met as students in Paris, where they married and made their home. My father's mother was also Spanish, but his father was Moroccan and a Muslim. I was

born in Arizona, where my family attended a non-denominational Christian church. We spoke Spanish, French and English at home. I met my wife in Greece during a college semester abroad where her family, Assyrians from Iran, had migrated. They belong to the Syrian Orthodox Church. Our children were adopted as infants. One is African-American and the other is from China. We try to help our children understand their heritage but there are almost too many threads of heritage to follow.

The situation above is not atypical in today's world, and from this anecdotal account, it would be difficult to ascertain precisely what "imagined" community or communities to which my acquaintance belongs. But as Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2004) point out, this is not a productive way to proceed. They suggest that identity is not something that can be easily determined by outside analysts. People who merely speak "the same language" or have "the same heritage" do not necessarily consider themselves to be part of the same community as everyone with whom they share some personal characteristic or history. As Bucholtz and Hall note:

It is therefore crucial to attend closely to speakers' own understandings of their identities, as revealed through the ethnographic analysis of their pragmatic and metapragmatic actions. When individuals decide to organize themselves into a group, they are driven not by some pre-existing and recognizable similarity but by agency and power. (Bucholtz & Hall 2004: 371)

This is entirely in conformity with Anderson's ideas about the construction of the imagined community. Such communities do not arise *sui generis*, they are the result of the confluence of common social behaviors and symbols with political and social institutions that privilege those characteristics as a basis for forging a sense of community. Thus, in considering the imagined community, it is necessary to understand that the common identity that is the basis for the feeling of community is constructed by forces that are external to the members of the community.

This provides the crux of Anderson's argument – namely, that the content that forms the basis for imagination in an imagined community is an institutional construction. Without this institutional support the community and the things that constitute it may wither away and die. And the most essential element in the formation and preservation of identity is frequently institutionally supported linguistic communication systems. The institutional support can be formalized through political structures, or it can be provided by informal groups, educational or religious institutions or even extended family groups. Individuals may choose not to belong to one or more of the communities that claim their identity or identities, but the reverse is not true. If an individual wants to belong to an imagined community and claim that membership as part of their personal identity, they must embrace the characteristic behavior, attitudes, and activities of the community.

It is also true that one aspect of creating a national identity may be to create categories of individuals who are structurally excluded from full community membership.

These people cannot “choose” to be part of the imagined community. They are automatically excluded, even if they are otherwise perfectly qualified to join on the basis of birth, language skills and acculturation. One example are the *burakumin* of Japan, a caste group associated with polluting professions, who were excluded from the benefits of full community membership such as employment and education. Speaking of his experience growing up in the former Belgian Congo and later in Belgium, Jean Muteba Rahier speaks of the situation of the mulattos – the Métis – who were the children of European colonials and native spouses, who were socially categorized as neither black nor white, as well as other “mixed” groups in the Western hemisphere such as *mestizos* in Latin America. He writes:

Too often, the scholars writing on nationalism have failed to recognize a contingent phenomenon of nationalism that elides a superficial reading and that contradicts the homogenizing ambition: the creation of one or various “Others” within and without the limits of the “national space.” (Rahier 2003: 93)

Rahier points out that in this internationalized world, individuals may be categorized as part of one group at birth, and as he or she moves to other geographical areas may find him or herself re-categorized by the new community. I had a personal experience in Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts with members of the Cape Verdean community before Cape Verde became an independent state. Cape Verdeans would immigrate to New England and expected to be part of the large Portuguese community already living there. To their great surprise they were categorized socially as “black” despite their Portuguese skills and personal cultural identification.

That said, there is no one way in which this takes place. The variations in the construction of personal identities within imagined communities are extensive. Since this discussion is focused on pragmatics, and particularly linguistic pragmatics, in the sections to follow, I will try to provide some account of the extraordinary variety of the ways that language and language behavior is incorporated within communities to contribute to, and sometimes qualify a person for acceptance in a community.

As with all elements of culture, these are points of orientation, not hard and fast rules. One can be Italian and not like pasta, but an Italian will never be surprised as a guest when pasta appears on the dinner table. One can be Japanese and not observe the intricate rules of politeness and deference that constitute the communicational practice of *keigo*. But a member of the Japanese “imagined community,” will definitely know what *keigo* is, and if he or she chooses to ignore this practice, will also have an excellent idea of the social consequences that will ensue.

Language instruction is one important way in which children develop community (and national) identity. Language instruction is, of course, unavoidable in contemporary society. Written and oral communication are necessary for the functions of

civic life. Nevertheless, prescriptive language instruction creates models of idealized language that vary considerably from individuals' personal sense of identity, and more importantly one's sense of identity in different contexts. This includes personal choices concerning stylistic levels, choice of one variety over another. As Bourdieu notes

What is problematic is not the possibility of producing an infinite number of grammatically coherent sentences but the possibility of using an infinite number of sentences in an infinite number of situations, coherently and pertinently. Practical mastery of grammar is nothing without mastery of the conditions for adequate use of the infinite possibilities offered by grammar.

(Bourdieu 1977: 646)

As will be seen below, the palate of variation of language use within a single community is enormous. True competence within a community requires command of a full set of skills. Moreover, as one conceives of one's self as having different personal identities, linguistic behavior will conform to the requirements of those identities.

#### 4. States need languages

The need for a common national language in the era of the modern nation-state (some of which are states with very weak national identity) is so strongly felt that nations have devised artificially constructed varieties to serve as the national vernacular. There is a practical reason for this, due to the need for uniformity in official communication, record keeping, public signage and education. However, as Van der Jeught notes, practicality is frequently overshadowed by symbolic identification with the state:

“L'État, c'est la langue,” an expression attributed to the French King Louis XIV, concisely conveys the idea that language is one of the most important features of national identity. In Europe, and not only there, this belief has led to the concept of linguistic hegemony (*cuius regio, eius lingua*), namely that a State should have only one national language. The tendency to establish a monolingual State has a long tradition. Already in 1380, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote: “God save the king, that is lord of this language,” identifying thus the king's language with that of the nation.

(Van der Jeught 2015: 9)

The drive to create standardized languages in the era of the nation-state is both an ideological and a practical matter. It is ideological when states feel that they must have their own “unique” language to underscore national identity. Blommaert and Verschueren have identified the imperative in modern times that states be uniform throughout as a dogma, the dogma of *homogeneity*:

[Homogeneity is] a view of society in which differences are seen as dangerous and centrifugal, and in which the 'best' society is suggested to be one without intergroup differences. In other words, the ideal model of society is mono-lingual, mono-ethnic, mono-religious, mono-ideological. Nationalism, interpreted as the struggle to keep groups as 'pure' and homogeneous as possible, is considered to be a positive attitude within the dogma of homogeneity. Pluri-ethnic or pluri-lingual societies are seen as problem-prone, because they require forms of state organization that run counter to the 'natural' characteristics of groupings of people.

(Blommaert & Verschuere 1991; Blommaert & Verschuere 1992: 362)

In many modern nations, the expectations that individuals will conform to the forms of standardized languages can be coercive. The standards may be established by elite arbiters, such as the Académie Française, or the editors of the German Duden. These bodies frequently have actual governmental enforcement power, for example, the Académie Française is the official recognized arbiter of standard French. Its power derives from the Toubon Law of 1994 mandating the use of French in most public and private communications (van der Jeught 2016a). The Académie vets every governmentally sponsored publication, such as academic articles published by French universities in their official academic journals as well as academic seminars and conventions (van der Jeught 2016a: 148). The Académie is also a political actor. It intervened with "furious opposition" in a parliamentary debate to protest constitutional protection for the legal status of regional "tongues" recognized as languages by their communities of speakers such as Alsatian, Basque, Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Occitan and Francoprovençal. Despite the Académie's disapproval, the measure passed Parliament (Allen 2008).

Official governmental movements to standardize and control language are numerous. Some of the most famous are the Turkish language reform of 1928; the Chinese character simplification reform starting in the 1950's, ongoing today; the German spelling reform of 1996; the Romanization of Azerbaijani beginning in 1929, ongoing today; and the Cyrillization of many Central Asian Languages during the Soviet Union, are all examples of state-imposed language standardization. A number of nations require command of the national standard language for immigrants to qualify for citizenship.

However, even official language arbitration bodies must change over time, yielding to trends in common usage. Spelling reforms are among the most common revisions. Inevitably, these organizations may create state-imposed limitations on communicative behavior that can meet with social resistance. The public has often resisted these reforms. The Turkish language reform was enforced with drastic measures. Schoolteachers who did not adopt the reformed language were reportedly arrested and even executed (Eminov 2001; Lewis 2002). Modern social opposition to even mild reforms can be seen frequently. Germany tried to impose spelling reform several times in the 20th Century with mixed results, as the citizenry resisted. The latest attempt in 1996

had mixed success with public protests, as seen in the image of the t-shirt in Figure 1 decrying the reduction of the  $\beta$  character in German spelling. The t-shirt further uses Gothic script, largely abandoned after World War II.



Figure 1. "Save the  $\beta$ "

The felt need for a single national language has extended beyond Europe to relatively new nations, who themselves have felt that if such an obvious national language does not already exist, it needs to be constructed for their nation to be thought of as fully legitimate. Some of the most prominent recently constructed national languages are Hindi, Bhasa Indonesia, Modern Hebrew and Modern Standard Arabic. Of these four, only Modern Hebrew, which began to be developed in the 19th Century, has been successful in becoming a first language – a “mother tongue” – for a large segment of the population of the State of Israel. However, in 2013, although 90% of Israelis were considered “proficient” in Hebrew, only 49% of Israelis over the age of 20 had Hebrew as their “mother tongue.” The other 51% of Israelis were raised speaking Russian, Arabic, French, English, Yiddish, and Ladino, and frequently used these for primary communication with family and close friends (Druckman 2013).

The homogeneity imperative has driven many “language revival” projects. Many communities see “language revival” or “language revitalization” as essential

for preserving a sense of identity, and also gaining respect among other polities as “real” communities. These efforts have increased as feelings of nationalism have grown starting in the 19th Century to the point that every community must have its own standard language. Preserving these linguistic varieties is dependent on political and other social processes, since the work involved is arduous and expensive. Nevertheless, the fervor with which many community members have pursued these enterprises is remarkable and unprecedented in human history.

One of the most successful efforts has been the revitalization of Irish in the Irish Republic. Irish instruction is mandatory in schools in Ireland, but English medium schools do not produce fluent Irish speakers. Schools with instruction entirely in Irish, known as *Gaelscoileanna*, have increased the number of Irish speakers (*Gaelscoileanna – Irish Medium Education* 2018). More than 60,000 students are regularly receiving their education through Irish immersion. One result has been the increase in popular Irish language media, including Irish television (Loftus 2016).

In the United States language revival in American Indian communities has been highly active. The economic situation of many American Indian tribes has improved, largely through income from casinos. As a result, many tribes have, over the last decades, developed an increased sense of their own identity and sovereignty – identifying themselves proudly as “nations.” Consequently, local tribal funding for school, college and community instruction in native languages has increased. Ojibwe is the most widely taught American Indian language. Others with regular instruction are Navajo, Lakota/Dakota, Cherokee, and Creek. The popularity of American Indian language instruction is high enough that commercial language instruction programs have been developed for the more popular languages. Since the number of native speakers is still small, these instructional efforts may be said to have higher symbolic value than functional communicative value. Simple phrases, such as greetings and social niceties, have become symbolic markers of community membership even if the speaker doesn’t know much more than these.

Today there are few nations on earth that do not have their own “language.” The official standardized language in Yugoslavia was Serbo-Croatian, with Serbian written in Cyrillic characters and Croatian in Roman characters. After the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1992, the successor states – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia all developed standardized official languages.

The case of Montenegro, where the standardization process is still underway, is a particularly interesting one in the light of Anderson’s work. “Montenegrin” is fully mutually intelligible with Serbian. Indeed, Montenegro was part of Serbia until its declared independence in 2007. The nation’s new constitution declared Montenegrin as the official language of the new nation, recognizing Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. The Montenegrins established a Council for the Codification

of the Montenegrin language, which is still wrangling over the official letters for the Montenegrin alphabet and many other features of the official language.

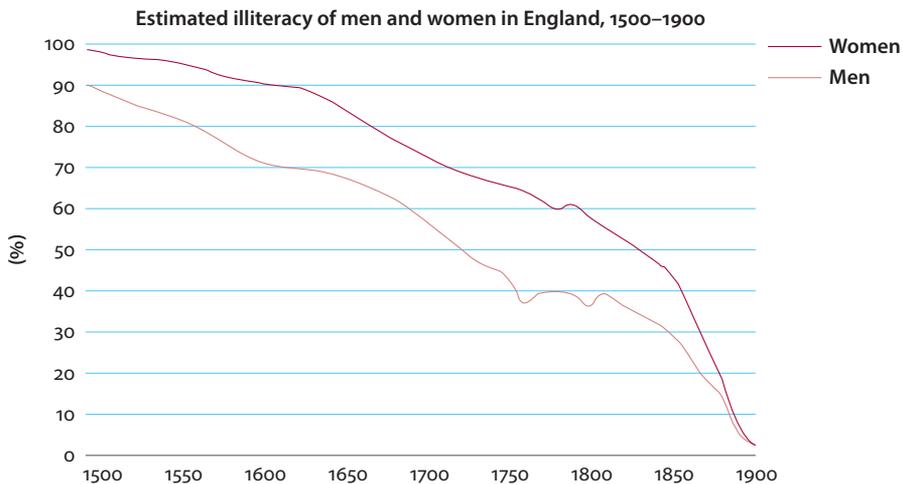
Some feel that the establishment of an official Montenegrin language is more political than linguistic. The Montenegrin P.E.N. Center, part of the P.E.N. international literary organization, wrote a declaration stating:

Montenegrin language does not mean a systemically separate language, but just one of four names (Montenegrin, Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian) by which Montenegrins name their part of [the] Shtokavian system, commonly inherited with Muslims, Serbs and Croats.  
(Declaration of Montenegrin P.E.N. Centre 1997)

## 5. Old languages, new models

In Chapter 5 of *Imagined Communities*, titled “Old Languages, New Models,” Anderson provides examples of well-recognized languages that have been codified and standardized long before “nationhood” or the Nation State became an organizational principle in the modern world. Languages such as Greek or French are examples of languages that were concretized by scholars and learned by elites in nations where literacy was highly restricted. The chart and table below show illiteracy in England from 1500–1900 and comparative literacy in European nations in 1700. It is paradoxical that, although French was universally acquired by European elites in 1700 and before, actual literacy in France at this time was extremely low.

**Table 1.** Illiteracy in Europe 1500–1900 (Mitch 2004: 244)



## Literacy for selected areas in Europe and North America c.1700

Region	Male literacy rate	Female literacy rate
England	40%	25%
France	29%	14%
Amsterdam	70%	44%
Moklinta, Sweden	89%	89%
Iceland	Almost 50%	Almost 50%
New England	70%	

*Note:* Literacy rates for England, France and Amsterdam based on signature rates at marriage

Despite the unusually high literacy rates in the Netherlands and Sweden shown in these tables, it seems that, however desirable, there was little practical need for extensive literacy in the general European population before and at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. We see in the English of Shakespeare and Elizabethan correspondence enormous variation in spelling and grammatical construction from person to person and institution to institution, and the same is true about all written languages during this period. Being “literate” in pre-modern times meant principally being able to use written language with little attention to standardization. The models for standardized language were first beginning to be seen already in the Renaissance. Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1320); the first modern European grammar, Antonio de Nebrija’s Spanish Grammar (1492); Martin Luther’s German bible translation (1534), the King James Bible (1611), Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* (1615) are some works that laid the foundations for standardization of their respective languages.

Anderson views the development of literacy in the 17th–19th Centuries as driven by and reinforcing of a new sense of community identity. Latin, Greek and Hebrew were worthy of study and semi-standardization, since they were the languages of scripture, which had to be treated with exactitude for religious reasons. There might be practical reasons for learning a vernacular for trade, diplomacy or interpersonal communication, but scholarly attention was decidedly of secondary importance until the advent of print-capitalism.

From this point on the old sacred languages – Latin, Greek, and Hebrew – were forced to mingle on equal ontological footing with a motley plebeian crowd of vernacular rivals. ... If all languages now shared a common (intra-)mundane status, then all were in principle equally worthy of study and admiration. But by who? Logically, since now none belonged to God, by their new owners: each language’s native speakers-and readers.  
(Anderson 1983: 70–71)

Anderson then points out that print-capitalism resulted in a new industry of lexicography, grammar, and philology. The “lexicographic revolution” (Ibid: 72) concretized languages in written form and thereby contributed to the creation of national identities. Every vernacular group was keen on having its own concretized standard language as a mark of identity. Emblematic of this movement was the “split” between Danish and Norwegian. The two varieties were mutually intelligible and virtually indistinguishable. Norwegian Patriot-lexicographer, Ivar Aasen wrote a new Norwegian grammar and dictionary in 1848 and 1850 respectively, thus creating a distinctive Norwegian print language.

*Imagined Communities* provides many examples of the ways in which the rise of national consciousness articulated with the rise of national sensibilities – a process that continues down to the present day as witnessed by the standardization of modern “creoles.” Indeed, in times recent to this writing we have seen linguistic varieties that were once dismissed as “inferior” communication media, standardized and developed as national languages as former colonial territories became independent nations. Some examples are Tak Pisin in New Guinea, Cape Verdean Creole (Kabuverdianu), Papiamentu and Haitian Creole (Kreyòl Ayisyen).

## 6. Standard languages and non-standard speakers

Because Anderson’s work is focused on the drive toward unified national consciousness, he does not go into detail about the behavioral reality on the ground for speakers in all but the smallest “nationalities.” The normal human situation is one where every separate face-to-face community exhibits a unique communicational form. It is for this reason that anthropologists and linguists find it difficult to even use the word “language” to describe the communicational structures of a community. The term “variety” is widely used, though the more vernacular “dialect” also reflects the variation found in “imagined communities.” It also gives rise to the quip attributed to sociolinguist Max Weinrich: “A language is a dialect with an army and navy.”

Because standard languages are artificial constructions, there is good reason to claim that their very existence is a kind of fiction – part of the “imagination” that underlies imagined communities. Language education specialist Timothy Reagan exemplifies this position:

I want to offer a fairly simple and straightforward proposition: there is, or at least there may well be, no such thing as English. Indeed, my claim is even a bit stronger than this – not only is there arguably no such thing as English, but there is also arguably no such thing as Russian, French, Spanish, Chinese, Hindi, or any other language.

(Reagan 2004: 42)

Reagan may be correct in an objective sense, though his position is not universally shared (Makoni & Pennycook 2005), but Anderson would broadly agree. Notwithstanding the artificial nature of standard languages, Anderson sees them as one of a range of symbolic elements contributing to the state construction of nationalism, and concomitantly the imagined community. He provides an excellent historical example of the contrast between local communities and broad national standardized languages regarding Japanese.

While the Japanese spoken in Kyushu was largely incomprehensible in Honshu, and even Edo-Tokyo and Kyoto-Osaka found verbal communication problematic, the half-Sinified ideographic reading-system was long in place throughout the islands, and thus the development of mass literacy through schools and print was easy and uncontroversial. (Anderson 1983: 95–96)

For researchers in pragmatics, this raises the fascinating question of how to assess the linguistic behavioral balance between the use of a variety which a person has learned from birth and the standard “language” that serves as the hallmark of national or community identity – a linguistic form that may be said not to exist as the result of any natural human communication processes, but rather as the result of a political process. In a sense, then, humans in modern times have learned a new linguistic skill. They have learned to speak more than one variety – the variety of their immediate face-to-face community and the overarching constructed variety that constitutes a standardized language. As a practical matter, if a community is to exist, its members must be able to communicate with each other in a mutually intelligible manner. Nevertheless, the formalized standard languages of mass communication which have evolved nearly everywhere as necessary artificial constructs, constitute one of the building blocks of Anderson’s imagined communities. In short, to belong to a “nation,” one must comprehend the standardized language of that nation.

The tension between local and national communication forms results in everyday communication dilemmas for individuals. Children in school are criticized when using their local vernacular. At the same time, they may be encouraged to use that vernacular in creative writing. Use of local vernacular forms is an effective rhetorical tool for politicians trying to appeal to voters in face-to-face encounters. However, that same rhetorical style is avoided in formal speeches addressed to a whole nation. Official communication in government and business often involves a struggle between overly formal adherence to official standards, and casual and direct expression that has strong personal and emotional impact (cf. Bailey 1997).

It is easy to dismiss the importance of local varieties in the context of national culture. However, local community identity becomes important in many situations. The most common example is the use of the shibboleth. The shibboleth constitutes a particularly

apt example in the context of Anderson's writings, since it is a linguistic method for ascertaining community belonging. Persons who can produce the shibboleth accurately through correct pronunciation of a difficult characteristic word or phrase are presumed to belong to the community, whether they are personally known to the person executing the test or not. Shibboleths date back to Roman times and likely long before. Indeed, the word shibboleth itself is a Hebrew word meaning the part of a plant that contains grains, such as a stalk on a wheat plant. In the Biblical Book of Judges, the tribe of Ephraim tried to invade the town of Gilead and was defeated. After the battle the Ephraimites tried to retreat to their home by crossing the River Jordan at public fords and were stopped by the people of Gilead. To distinguish the Gileadites from the Ephraimites those crossing the river were asked to pronounce the word *shibboleth*. The Ephraimites would pronounce the word [sibboleth] and were killed. The Bible gives the following account:

And the Gileadites took the passages of Jordan before the Ephraimites: and it was so, that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay;

Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.

(Judges 12: 5–6, Holy Bible, King James Version)

There are many examples of shibboleths being used as a mark of community membership. One night in 1302 the citizens of Bruges went out hunting Frenchmen: if they pronounced “Schild ende vriend” with initial ‘sk’ and ‘fr’ instead of ‘sʃ’ and ‘vr’, they were killed (Ryckbosch & Vrijders 2005). The Frisian rebel leader, Pier Gerlofs Donia used the phrase: *Bûter, brea, en griene tsiis; wa’t dat net sizze kin, is gjin oprjochte Fries*, which means “Butter, rye bread and green cheese, whoever cannot say that is not a genuine Frisian,” during a Frisian rebellion (1515–1523). Sailors who couldn’t say this had their ships plundered and were thrown overboard; soldiers who couldn’t say the phrase were beheaded (Ritsema 2008: 10). This shibboleth continues today as a popular Frisian iconic phrase.



Figure 2. Frisian Shibboleth

In more modern times, the shibboleth “lollapalooza” was used by American soldiers during World War II to trap Japanese, for whom /l/ and /r/ were allophones. Filipinos could say the word; Japanese could not, thus revealing them as the enemy (Owuor 2015: 144). During World War II the Dutch resistance identified German infiltrators by letting them pronounce “Scheveningen,” the seaside district of The Hague. For the Germans the bad news came if the initial ‘sx’ was replaced by ‘j.’ During the Bosnian conflict in the 1990s shibboleths were used to identify members of local communities (see Senior 2004 for this and many other shibboleths). Those without the ability to use the correct pronunciation were detained or killed. The use of shibboleths in Bosnia had long currency dating back perhaps centuries due perhaps to the extraordinary numbers of recognizable varieties of Slavic, Greek and Albanian there (Evans 2013: 96).

Shibboleths would be a mere curiosity if one doesn’t understand their more profound meaning. The ability to pronounce things without a detectable accent is the ultimate sign of community belonging. Even in sub-national community units, it is a touchstone for the “imagined” aspect of community belonging. If people sound the same, they must be part of the same community.

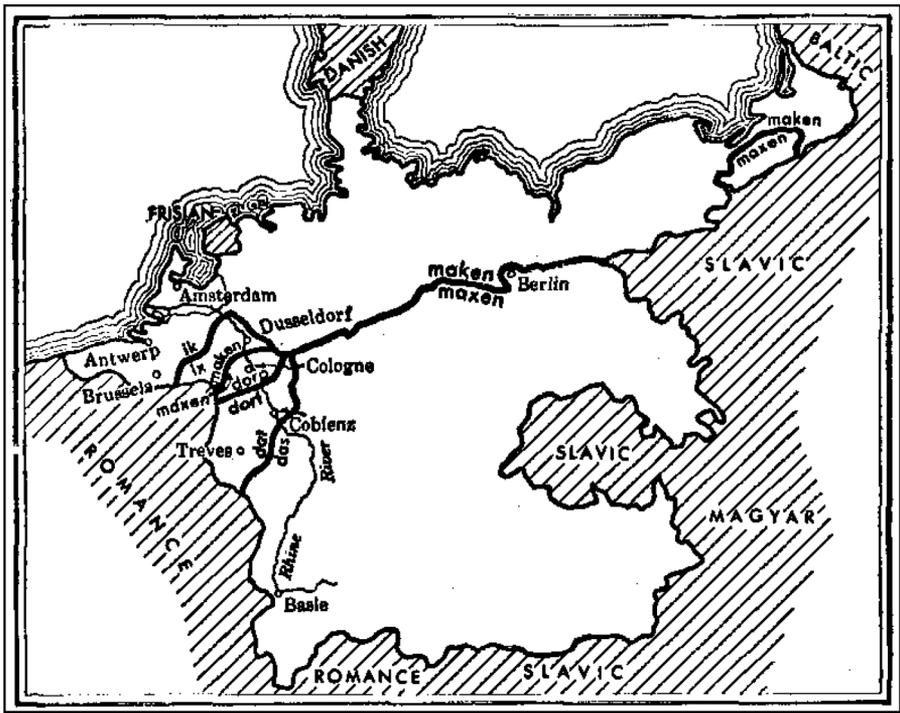


Figure 3. German isoglosses (from Bloomfield 1935: 344)

However, forms of speech judged to be “neutral” often do not correspond to standardized varieties. The most “neutral” form of spoken German is generally felt to be the variety spoken in Hanover, not coincidentally the place where Luther accomplished his Bible translation. The most “neutral” form of Italian is centered in Tuscany, where Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*. The standard form of Swahili is the variety spoken in Zanzibar. The “best” Mandarin Chinese is spoken in the Donbei/Northeast region. However, in all of these “neutral” areas, the spoken and written vernacular still may fall far short of the standardized ideal.

When we examine actual speech in nations that seem to have monolithic standards, we find that there is considerable variation in the realization of that standard on all levels: phonological, morphological, syntactical and discourse. The linguistic analytic unit, the *isogloss* is used to delineate some of these differences geographically. In Figure 3, one can see some of the isoglosses for Standard German (pre-World War II). These isoglosses correspond with shifting political boundaries over many centuries, the most pronounced differences occurring in the “Rhenish fan” in the far Western part of the country where differences in pronunciation can divide communities.

## 7. Bi- and multi-lingual nations

In modern sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological research, “speech communities” are a more viable analytic unit than “language communities.” One “speech community” often consists of many “language communities” (Silverstein 1998: 407). A “speech community” may be localized, coterminous with state boundaries or transcend national boundaries. Despite the ideological drive to establish “one language – one nation” in many countries, this may be better thought of as an aspirational goal than an accomplished fact. At an even more fine-grained level, there are regional or local varieties that are acknowledged in many nations. These local varieties may have official status at a provincial level and may exist in written or legal form for court proceedings, official documents, media broadcasts and government communications.

The simple practicalities of achieving this can be enormous. One obvious reason is that post-colonial states often have been left with political boundaries that are not coterminous with linguistic or ethnic boundaries. This was occasionally done on purpose. The Durand Line dividing Afghanistan from British India (later Pakistan) was specifically designed to split the troublesome Pushtun community and their Pashto language in half, with the idea that they could thus be better controlled by the British colonial army (Kaura 2017). The Kurdish population was split among five separate states after World War II – a situation that continues to generate violence today.

Pre-nation-state Europe, where royal marriages and political alliances generated unusual combinations of ethnic groups within state boundaries has created a legacy of enormous legal problems for many states (Van der Jeught 2015; Van der Jeught

2016b). The Catalan language community spans four nations (France, Andorra, Spain and Italy). The Basque community is divided between France and Spain.

Outside of Europe, Iran has numerous language communities, many of which also transcend national boundaries (Beeman 1986). India has 22 officially recognized languages, including Tamil, Bengali, Punjabi, Kashmiri. Anderson's own area of specialization, Indonesia, has approximately 50 recognized languages. The most intense concentration of local varieties is in Papua New Guinea. In addition to the three "official" languages, there are 836 recognized local languages used in this nation. The official language of Nigeria is English, but Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo are recognized languages of the parliament and there are 529 other languages spoken in that nation as well as a local Pidgin. Zambia recognizes 72 languages within its borders. Even the small Pacific island nation, Vanuatu houses 110 distinct local varieties. Each of the states cited above can be considered to be "speech communities" despite the multiple varieties spoken there, largely due to the imposition of a *lingua franca* in each state, assuring some form of communality of communication.

This linguistic complexity pervades most, if not all of the world's nations, where many "national" languages are recognized along with the "official" language or languages in which government business is conducted and which are mandatory as media of education.

The existence of these overarching common languages did not arise automatically. Most exist because the long colonial period in human history resulted in a kind of linguistic hegemony, where the language of the colonizer became *de facto* the language of colonial administration. Local individuals who wished to be employed in an official capacity had to learn the official language, though it might not be in any way their mother tongue. In the post-colonial period, these linguistic policies continued – partly due to the enormous difficulty in shifting from the colonial language to local varieties.

As a result, there are many nations that recognize more than one official language as part of their national identity. These nations are well known as seen in the chart below:

**Table 2.** Multi-lingual states

Nation/State	Languages
Abkhazia	Abkhazian and Georgian
Afghanistan	Pashto and Dari (Afghan Persian)
Aruba	Papiamento and Dutch
Belarus	Belarusian and Russian
Belgium	Dutch, French and German
Brunei	Malay and English

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Cameroon	English and French
Canada	English and French
Central African Republic	French and Sango
Curaçao	Papiamentu, Dutch and English
Cyprus	Greek and Turkish
Djibouti	Arabic and French
East Timor	Tetum and Portuguese
Faroe Islands	Faroese and Danish
Fiji	Fijian, English and Hindi
Finland	Finnish and Swedish
Hong Kong	English and Chinese
India	Hindi and English (and 22 official regional languages)
Ireland	Irish and English
Israel	Hebrew and Arabic
Kazakhstan	Kazakh and Russian
Kiribati	Kiribati and English
Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyz and Russian
Luxembourg	Luxembourgish, French and German
Macau	Chinese and Portuguese
Malta	Maltese and English
Marshall Islands	Marshalese and English
Morocco	Arabic and Berber
New Caledonia	French and Kanak languages
New Zealand	English, New Zealand Sign Language and Maori
Palau	Palauan and English
Papua New Guinea	Tok Pisin, English and Hiri Motu
Paraguay	Guarani and Spanish
Philippines	Filipino and English
Rapa Nui (Easter Island)	Rapa Nui, Chilean Spanish
Samoa	Samoan and English
Singapore	English, Mandarin Chinese, Malay and Tamil
South Africa	isiZulu, isiXhosa, Afrikaans, Sepedi, Setswana, English, Sesotho, Xitsonga, Siswati, Tshivenda, and isiNdebele.
South Sudan	Arabic and English
Sri Lanka	Sinhala and Tamil
Sudan	Arabic and English
Switzerland	German, French, Italian and Romansh

Table 2. (Continued)

Tonga	Tongan and English
Tuvalu	Tuvaluan and English
Vanuatu	Bislama, English and French

An inspection of the list above shows a fascinating pattern. The majority of bilingual or multilingual nations have as at least one of their official languages the language of their colonial past. English, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and Portuguese predominate. The second “official” language is likely to be the predominant pre-colonial local language or languages. South Africa is a particularly apt illustration of this tendency. The most widely spoken first language in South Africa is Zulu (isiZulu) followed by Xhosa (isiXhosa), Afrikaans and English. Even though Afrikaans and English, the languages of the colonial era, are the third and fourth largest “first languages,” they still are the predominant languages of government, education, and commerce. Even for English, however, several distinctly South African varieties have emerged that are gaining acceptance in official circles (Hibbert 2003). As mentioned above, India recognizes 22 “official” languages, but aside from English and Hindi, these are “official” only at the local level. All Indians are expected to learn English, Hindi and one of the other official languages appropriate to their region of residency.

There are four significant exceptions to the single standard language dominance pattern. Belgium, Canada, Luxembourg, and Switzerland. These four nations have their own unique histories in which different language groups have been enclosed within a state boundary and have been relatively successful in fostering official language equality for two or more varieties. Even so, perfect bilingualism or multilingualism does not exist in any of these states except for Luxembourg, which will be discussed below. Belgium has three official languages, but few Belgians are perfectly bilingual. Only around 20% of Belgians living in the French or German speaking sections of the country speak Dutch with perfect fluency. The proportion of citizens in the Dutch speaking area who speak French is somewhat higher, but citizens in the Dutch and French speaking areas generally do not speak German. The preponderant language in Switzerland is overwhelmingly German, with smaller proportions of the population speaking French, Italian or Romansh. There are monolingual French speakers in Canada, and many English speakers in Canada who do not speak French, although its instruction is mandatory in schools.

Luxembourg, then, is almost the only nation in the world for which complete multilingualism is an aspirational hallmark of national identity. For this reason, it merits special attention considering Anderson's important work. Luxembourgish (Lëtzebuergesch) is the historical “national language” – it is a variety of Franconian-Moselle German (Gilles 1999; Gilles & Moulin 2003). There is a prevailing “doctrine” in the

European union of “one nation – one language”(Van der Jeught 2015: 24), although in recent years protection for linguistic minorities has grown in member states. In this regard Luxembourg represents a departure, as it is officially a tri-lingual nation. Luxembourgish as the recognized “national language” is commonly spoken and also written, but Standardized German and French are fully recognized as official administrative languages. Newspapers are published in all three languages – occasionally in the same paper. Literary writers are as likely to author books and stories in any of the three languages, and all are present in broadcast media. The education system is rigorous in its efforts to promote perfect trilingual competence (Fehlen 2002; Horner & Weber 2008).

Even with this official policy in place, there is still social differentiation in terms of language use. Individuals may have the ability to work with all three languages, but each language may have a slightly different functionality in everyday life. Indeed, proficiency English may also be necessary as a practical matter.

Proficiency in Luxembourgish alone does not lead to success on the job market: knowledge of the standard varieties of French and English are often necessary in the private sector, whereas the standard varieties of French and German – together with Luxembourgish – are normally required in the public sector. It is access to combinations of the standard varieties of French, English and, to a lesser extent, German that creates opportunities in various spheres of employment, whereas knowledge of Luxembourgish continues to serve as a gate-keeping device with regard to civil service positions. (Horner & Weber 2008: 119)

So, in the example of Luxembourg, perhaps the most explicitly tri-lingual nation on earth, we see that the different languages that are hallmarks of this national identity are still differentiated according to function and context. Ethnographic studies of language use in many countries that espouse more than one “official” language reveal similar patterns. One language may be used for official communication, whereas an historical vernacular is used for everyday communication. Moreover, the languages, despite all efforts, are not equal even in the education system resulting not in trilingual fluency, but a situation where students are not fully competent in any of the three languages. The strain on students is a factor in less than ideal school outcomes. This is particularly true of recent immigrants, which now constitute nearly half of the population.

Luxembourgish plays a subordinate role as a written language [in school education], German is replaced by French only after a few years of school and pupils do not have the necessary prerequisites for French as a native language. It appears that most pupils have in fact a triglossic deficit.

In a 2006 Report on the Luxembourgish school system, a group of Council of Europe experts was particularly harsh. It concluded that the system cannot achieve its goals, such as social cohesion, integration of newcomers, individual success and a competitive economy.

The high drop-out rate of students is of particular concern in this regard. Moreover, as early as primary school, 17,9% of pupils have an educational delay of one year or more. This figure rises to 62,6% for secondary school students. Besides, only 38,4% of students make it to the classical school (as opposed to vocational training).

(Van der Jeught 2015: 119–120)

Delving into the linguistic history of the state reveals that the current day situation is the result of a complex historical process over many centuries. French was at one time the prestige language of the upper classes, German held sway during times of German political (and military) influence, and Luxembourgish emerged in the post-World War II period as a symbolic mark of national identity. So, even this paragon tri-lingual nation reveals that a great deal of social and cultural fluctuation took place before arriving at the present situation, which is still highly dynamic (Van der Jeught 2015: 109–126; Horner & Weber 2008; Fehlen 2002).

## 8. Linguistic habitus and speaker strategies

Looking at the situation in Luxembourg, one can conclude that expecting the population of any nation to maintain perfect bilingual or multi-lingual skills, and for the state to function with using different language varieties equally may be an idealistic desirable goal, but it is extremely difficult to accomplish. The more natural pattern is one where co-existing varieties become culturally and functionally differentiated. In short, speaker behavior is a kind of “linguistic *habitus*” – a concept deriving from Bourdieu who defines the general concept of habitus as follows:

[...] the structures characterizing a determinate class of conditions of existence produce the structures of the habitus, which in their turn are the basis of the perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences. The habitus, product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history.

(Bourdieu 1990: 54; Blommaert 2015)

This linguistic habitus encompasses a situation where all speakers develop a routine where they are switching on a regular observable basis between varieties during the course of their daily lives. Indeed, it is difficult not to conclude that variety switching is the natural universal pattern of human language use. Indeed, it is the ability to acquire this linguistic habitus that may be the most salient component of membership in an imagined community. If one can switch readily between varieties under the proper contextual circumstances, one can claim membership in the community of others who can do this as part of their own identity.

This pattern of alternation of varieties on the part of individual speakers, when applying to different variants of the “same language” has been understood for

decades under the general term *diglossia* as articulated by Charles Ferguson (Ferguson 1959; see also Daniëls 2018 for a recent approach to Arabic diglossia). Ferguson's original designation covered usages such as the alternation between Katharévoussa and Dhimotikí in Greek or Swiss German and Standard German in Switzerland.

Fishman accounted for this alternation based on a variety of factors as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Factors governing diglossic alternation

DIFFERENCES	
Alternation parameter	Description
Specialization	One variety is used for specialized purposes, the other for general use
Prestige	One variety has higher social prestige
Context of use	One variety is acquired under special circumstances, such as in formal school instruction, or in special usage contexts such as in a court or religious establishment.
Standardization	One variety is highly standardized with formal grammar and orthography
Complexity	One variety is more complex and/or highly inflected
SIMILARITIES	
Description	Diglossic communalities
Vocabulary	The two varieties share the bulk of their vocabulary, though there may be some distribution of terms according to formality
Phonology	The two varieties share overall phonological structures

Fishman and Gumperz extended this concept to include situations such as in Paraguay, Belgium or in the example of Luxembourg when two standardized languages were used interchangeably (Gumperz 1971; Fishman 1972). In this case the same criteria apply for the variation in use of the different varieties and styles that are components of every communication system (Beeman 1977; Jakobson 1960; Hymes 1974)

Fishman continued to elaborate on his exploration of bilingualism. In an important paper in 1980 he posited that speakers not only shift varieties, they also undergo a shift in identity when they change. He called this shift “di-ethnia,” to designate the ability to alter cultural identity in not only bilingual, but also bicultural situations. He points out that the societal compartmentalization and functional specificity that facilitates this ability to switch is difficult to establish and maintain, but that some societies “have developed a talent for exactly such arrangements” (Fishman 1980: 3).

Ethnographic studies of language variation, including diglossia, bilingualism and biculturalism have shown that speakers in communities that have multiple linguistic

varieties officially or unofficially available to them have challenges in maintaining equal competence in all of these varieties. The universal existence of non-standard varieties competing with formal standard varieties might not be problematic, except for the fact that the non-standard varieties are not socially neutral, as Fishman noted in his original formulation of diglossia. Taking one of Fishman's criteria, different varieties frequently are either seen as "prestige" varieties or as "stigmatized" varieties (Labov 1973; Labov 2006). Prestige forms may be just as deviant from standardized forms as stigmatized forms (Ross 1954), so there is no particular measurable correspondence of features that would suggest that prestige forms are "closer" to standardized varieties. Nor are stigmatized forms necessarily "less logical" or "deficient" compared to standardized varieties (Labov 1969). The prestige factor may have to do with regional origin, economic status, educational status or professional occupation.

Whole languages may be stigmatized. In Pakistan, the "official" language is Urdu. Paradoxically few people in Pakistan speak Urdu as their "mother tongue," the exception being Mohajirs, individuals who migrated to Pakistan after the partition of the state from British India, a group who are stigmatized in Pakistan today. The principal languages of pre-independence Pakistan were Punjabi in the North, Sindhi in the South, Baluchi in the Southwest and Pashto in the Northwest. Several other smaller languages are also spoken.

Today in Pakistan the "prestige" language is English. In Lahore, the large metropolis in the North, Punjabi is the vernacular language everyone learns at home. Punjabi, Urdu and English are also taught in school, but Urdu is only used in limited formal situations. There is a hierarchy of prestige. English is the most prestigious language. Urdu is next and Punjabi is the least prestigious. Persons who speak Urdu or English with a strong Punjabi accent are disadvantaged socially and professionally (Sullivan 2005). Speaking with a research colleague working in Pakistan, I was surprised to find that when he addressed professional level people in Lahore in Punjabi they were insulted. It was as if he was talking down to them, implying that they didn't know English, and were therefore "lower class."

The same dynamic applies in Central Asia where Russian is the prestige language despite the ubiquitous presence of local varieties such as Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Turkman. An official, scholar or high-level business person would expect to speak Russian in most public situations. Even in the Middle East, where Arabic is so dominant, European languages – predominantly French and English – are used to indicate status. Not knowing these languages is professionally untenable for those who aspire to middle and upper-class careers.

But at the same time, Rudyard Kipling's admonition that one must be able to "walk with kings, nor lose the common touch" is essential to function in social life in any nation. In the United States, middle-class African Americans, many of whom have grown up using African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Rickford 2003) often

feel challenged adjusting to different social contexts in managing the speech varieties in which they are proficient. African-American arts and culture journalist Joshua Adams writes:

Growing up, my Black friends said I talked “white” and my non-Black friends said I talked “ghetto.” When I’m with non-Black friends, in the classroom, or at a job interview, I automatically turn on the “talking white” switch. When I’m with my Black friends, I reset to my normal south-side Chicago diasporic slur. Pretty soon, I was both the accuser and the accused in the racial speech witch trials. (Adams 2015)

Adams’ story can be repeated all over the world by people in different nations, since the human reality is that humans are continually managing different speech modalities. Some systems are extremely complex. Iranian *ta’ārof* (Beeman 2017; Beeman 1986), Japanese *keigo* (Wetzel 2004; Pizziconi 2003; Shibamoto-Smith & Cook 2011; Shibamoto-Smith 2011), and Javanese *krama iggil* (Errington 1988) all embody substitutions of semantically equivalent verbs, pronouns and other speech elements according to social rules of politeness, respect and formality. Thus, even when speaking a “foreign” language, native speakers of languages such as these still embody the same linguistic habitus in their linguistic and social behavior toward others (Bahmani 2004; Wijayanto 2013; Iwasaki 2011).

One group that is particularly challenged are immigrants. In the Netherlands and Belgium in speaking about communities who have immigrated from different regions, a geological metaphor has been used for such groups for some time – perhaps as an alternative to the term “(im)migrant,” a category which is often seen in a negative light. In this terminology, original residents of a nation are “autochthonous” and immigrants are “allochthonous.” (In geological terms, an autochthonous stratum is an original geological formation, over which an allochthonous layer is deposited through water, plate movement or other means. Autochthonous is also used to mean “native people” in English). The Dutch terms are *autochtoon* and *allochtoon* (Yanow & Haar 2013; Zienkowski 2017).

Immigrants, or allochthonous people are frequently required to learn the standard language of the countries to which they migrate. This is especially true in Europe. Germany, Sweden and other states establish language classes specifically for these people. The states that welcome these people view learning the standardized language of the state as proof of the desire of the allochthonous people to join the nation. Of course the practical need to communicate for work, official business and education is usually cited as the reason for the (semi-)compulsory language instruction.

Despite the efforts of the new home state, however, these communities often maintain a separate communication community that uses the vernacular of the community of origin for everyday interpersonal and often commercial dealings. Their communication medium may be a standard language of their homeland, or it may be an indigenous

variety. Initially the allochthonous community may truly be a face-to-face community when numbers are small, but as their numbers grow, they transform into an Andersonian imagined community. Frequently new members gain admission through their ability to speak the vernacular variety that unites the community.

Even when individuals are speaking “the same language” to each other, they may still view themselves as being part of different communities. These differences may be understood in pragmatic terms. Discourse frames, issues of discussion and rhetorical practice may divide communities from each other. One such community comprises Moroccans and their descendants living in Belgium. Pragmatic linguist Jan Zienkowski has published a detailed research monograph dealing with the Moroccan allochthonous community in the Flemish speaking area of Belgium and the communication strategies they and their hosts employ to carry out day-to-day interaction, particularly in the realm of political activity. Zienkowski’s study is particularly timely given the risk of stigmatization due to violent activities on the part of terrorists in Belgium in recent years (Zienkowski 2017)

The United States is full of such communities. The largest language community in the United States aside from “native English” speakers are Spanish speakers – but even here there are many varieties of Spanish depending on the geographic origin of speakers. The same is true of Chinese, Portuguese, and French speakers, to name some of the most prominent linguistic groups. These communities have their own news publications, radio and television broadcasts, social clubs, and sports teams. Even when speaking English, in contrast to earlier waves of immigrants, many retain the cultural identities of their regions of origin – and thus their membership in “imagined” allochthonous communities. The presence of so many – actually hundreds – of “allochthonous” communities in the United States has become a major political issue. One of the most frequent complaints is that the allochthonous communities “don’t learn English.” Of course, this is not true, but such judgements are indicative of the highly symbolic importance of language as an indicator of community membership.

## 9. Conclusion – imagined communities, imagined languages

Benedict Anderson’s concept of the imagined community has rightfully sparked the interest and attention of social scientists in many disciplines. The symbolic touchstones used by members of imagined communities to cement their community identities are highly varied. However, having a “common language” is one element that is privileged.

Community members believe that they belong to X community because they speak X language, and if someone else whom they have never met also speaks X language, they are accepted as belonging to the same X community. Examined from the perspective of pragmatics, however, this syllogism quickly breaks down.

First, I have suggested that the idea that members of an imagined community speak a common language is a fiction. Given the enormous variation in speech varieties in all communities, members of an imagined community only “imagine” that they are speaking a common language. We may thus conclude that they embrace an “imagined language” to accord with the imagined community. By no means do I wish to suggest that the feeling of community is unreal. It is, however, essentially a political construct.

Second, I have tried to show that the idea of a unitary standard language, though the result of extensive scholarly work, is also a fictional construct. Indeed, as Reagan stated above: “There is no English ... etc.” (Reagan 2004: 41). Given its important functionality in the operations of states, as industrialized and communicative interconnectivity has grown in human society, it would be absurd to say that standard languages are therefore invalid or useless. They are an essential social and administrative institution in all communities. Therefore, it is not surprising that acquisition of a standard language is a requirement for belonging to a community. Proficiency in this standard language is frequently a requirement for a successful life – as a major factor governing personal and romantic relations, educational advancement, and career achievement.

Third, there is no community on earth where only one communicational variety is used in everyday life. All states and all nations are multi-varietal, often with varieties that originate in different historical language families.

Fourth, creolization because of social and linguistic contact between communities is a normal, fluid and ongoing process. At some point when communities’ common identities coalesce, and they develop a political and social structural infrastructure, what was once seen as a “creole” or “pidgin” is standardized and becomes a “language” that becomes a touchstone component of community identity.

Fifth, language acquisition and language use can be politically or socially coercive through community regulation. This regulation is often justified as a measure to preserve the community and to ensure the welfare of its members. As a practical matter, for community members to reject or be unable to acquire a standard language is to endanger their ability to advance in life. Deficiency in this language acquisition can even be dangerous. In the case of the imposition of a shibboleth test, not being able to “pass” can get a person killed. Similarly, using standard language as a hallmark of education or breeding can significantly inhibit progress in life. In many states acquisition of the standardized language associated with the state is a legal requirement for citizenship. It is a test of competency in decisions affecting admission to higher education programs. Acquisition of a standard ritual language may also be required to be considered a member of a religious community.

There is a central paradox in the language-community relationship: Standard languages are essential qualifications for community membership, but no one actually

speaks any standard language with consistent uniform perfection and precision. Not only do even the most erudite users of language regularly lapse into non-standard discourse, they do so with pragmatic competence. They act in conformity with a linguistic habitus that requires adjustment to physical and social context, participants, rhetorical purpose, discourse standards and communicational effectiveness. So, when two people who do not know each other declare that they speak the “same language,” it is a certainty that they do not. They only imagine that they do.

In modern post-colonial times we also see that individuals may belong to more than one imagined community. Fishman's concept of *di-ethnia* in which persons may activate more than one language as a way of identifying themselves with more than one community is now a standard feature of modern society throughout the world (Fishman 1980)

From a linguistic and pragmatic standpoint, Anderson's views of the relationship between language and community are highly useful, but perhaps not in the ways that he himself envisioned. He raised wonderful questions for linguistic analysts, and for research in pragmatics. Certainly, the cultural and social-psychological persistence of “imagined languages” as components of identity for members of imagined communities even though they do not exist in observable reality is something pragmatic researchers must strive to understand more fully.

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