

Languages, 'Languoids', and ISO-codes for Language Diversity and Variation

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Topics

- The need of unambiguous reference to languages and similar entities
- The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms
- Other systems and their problems
- Languages and “languoids” – what are they?
- Towards a topology of languages
- Multidimensional linguistic variation
- Conclusions

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1) The need of unambiguous reference to languages and similar entities

- Reference to languages traditionally by name
- Recently, worldwide language diversity in focus
- A language name can be ambiguous

Ainu (China) – Ainu (Japan)

Aja (Benin) – Aja (Sudan)

Ama (Papua New Guinea) – Ama (Sudan)

Amba (Solomon Islands) – Amba (Uganda)

Aruá (Amazonas State) – Aruá (Rondonia State)

Asu (Nigeria) – Asu (Tanzania)

Atong (India) – Atong (Cameroon)

Awa (China) – Awa (Papua New Guinea)

1) The need of unambiguous reference to languages and similar entities

- Reference to languages traditionally by name
- Recently, worldwide language diversity in focus
- A language name can be ambiguous
- Most languages have many names:
 - In different languages, contexts, spelling variants

German: Deutsch – allemand –
Tedesco – niemiecki – Tysk – ...

Niederdeutsch – Plattdeutsch – Platt

Aweti: Awetí, Aueti, Auiti, Auetö,
Aueto, Awytyza ti'ingku

1) The need of unambiguous reference to languages and similar entities

- Reference to languages traditionally by name
- Recently, worldwide language diversity in focus
- A language name can be ambiguous
- Most languages have many names:
 - In different languages, contexts, spelling variants
 - Preferred / accepted names change over time
- Problems when searching:
 - low recall (missing relevant hits) and
 - low precision (getting many irrelevant hits)

1) The need of unambiguous reference to languages and similar entities

A standard is clearly needed by / for:

- diversity linguists and linguistic infrastructures: WALS, archives, OLAC, Linguist List, etc.
- Information technology: Unicode, Microsoft, Wikipedia, Apple, Oracle, etc.
- Identifying content, user interfaces, spelling checkers, input methods, and language technology (language recognition, parser, text-to-speech technology and so forth)

1) The need of unambiguous reference to languages and similar entities

- Technology not only for a few major languages
- Industry: “We don’t want to be a bottleneck for language communities!” – not limited to the “economically significant” ones
- Where is the line anyways? A moving target...
- Unicode Consortium mission:
“This Corporation’s specific purpose shall be to enable people around the world to use computers in any language...”

1) The need of unambiguous reference to languages and similar entities

- Soon, oral human-computer-interaction may replace typing and pointing to a large extent
- Technology for coping with oral (and written) variation will be developed
- Therefore a need for identifying and labelling language *varieties* is arising
- There are objections against standardizing at all, “the situation is just too messy and divers”
- Still, technology will move ahead

1) The need of unambiguous reference to languages and similar entities

- Any standard is necessarily a compromise: compare the time zones, a pragmatic arbitrary cut through a continuum ([Simons 2009](#))
- Our situation is quite comparable to biology
- Clades currently are the best theoretical approach, “species” is a debated notion
- But the “species” concept is a good basis for the Linnaean system for labelling living beings
- The “clades-labeling-system” does not fly

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2) The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms

- ISO/TC37/SC2/WG1: language coding
- 1967: terminologists release ISO 639 (-1), two-letter codes, now 200 entries
- 1998: ISO 639-2, also by librarians, now ~505 three-letter codes for ~410 “major” languages and ~70 collective codes for language groups
- From 2000 on: pressure on ISO to cover all languages (WWW, Unicode, OLAC, diversity linguistics: WALS, language documentation)

2) The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms

- Ethnologue was then identified as best and most comprehensive listing of languages
- SIL agreed to develop and maintain ISO 639-3
- SIL adjusted their three-letter-codes to existing codes in part 2 etc. (~600 changes)
- Part 3 first published in 2007, confirmed 2010
- Yearly updated, with an explicit procedure
- Now 7864 code elements, Ethnologue in sync
- Living and recently extinct individual languages

2) The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms

- Part 4: “General principles of coding...” (drafts since 2008, yet to be finalized and confirmed)
- Part 5: three-letter-codes for language groups (70 fr. part 2 and 50 more, maintained by LoC)
- Since 2008: attempts at a part 6, four-letter-codes for “comprehensive coverage of language variants” by GeoLang Ltd., UK
- Rejected by ISO/TC37 in 2014, there is no pt. 6
- Framework for linguistic variation needed

2) The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms

Uptake:

- Parts 1 and 2 are arguably the most often used ISO standards of all (device's user interfaces)
- Part 3 is now largely replacing part 2
- Important: [IETF BCP 47](#) is a key industry technology using ISO 639-3 ([talk Constable](#))
- Part 4 is needed to clarify criteria & conception
- Part 5 is apparently hardly used at all

2) The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms

Problems and criticisms of ISO 639(-3):

- Being "authoritative" (funders & archives require it..., government's decisions,...):
Partly a straw man; – in any case not really ISO's fault, any such standard can and would be misused
- Connection with Ethnologue; missionary organization as registration authority
Is problematic, but are there alternatives? Industry needs more stability than a website; revision process is expensive; a long-term commitment is needed

2) The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms

Problems and criticisms of ISO 639(-3):

- The codes look like abbreviations and sometimes are mnemonic of inappropriate labels
True, but no good solution seems feasible.
65% of the 17,576 possible combinations are taken.
Mnemonic match is now often impossible anyways.
ISO will not get into the merits of appropriate labels – who is authorized to complain, and who to decide?
Complete replacement impossible, stability needed
“Best thought of as three-digit base 26 numbers”.

2) The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms

Problems and criticisms of ISO 639(-3):

- Genealogical classification is questionable
Not part of ISO standard, Ethnologue is not ISO
- Boundaries between languages / dialect chains
- Language vs. dialect / structural vs. functional
General problems, pragmatic solutions are possible
- Change process: involvement of experts is too low; lack of transparency wrt. people involved
Possible cure: scientific advisory board from HERE

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3) Other systems and their problems

- [UNESCO atlas of languages in danger](#): only EL
- [Multitree](#): everything side by side; no standardized names; only families, languages & dialects
- [Endangered Languages Catalogue](#) (ELcat): EL only, crowd sourcing – review process?
- The [Linguasphere Register](#): Poor PDF-files; last edition: 2000, no sources; idiosyncratic; one flat hierarchy, mixed socio-political, linguistic and geographic criteria. E.g. std. German: “**52-ACB-dl**”
- **All of these face the sustainability problem!**

3) Other systems and their problems

- Glottolog: certainly the most promising alternative
 - + For languages: best knowledge synthesis around
 - + Sources are made explicit
 - + Usable unique codes, links to other resourcesAdmittedly not reliable for dialects and variants (they are taken from Multitree, no systematic revision)
Funding? Review process? Sustainability?
Also only one flat hierarchy, mostly on dialects (not other dimensions – whistled ‘languages’ separate)
Authoritative for genealogic grouping

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4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

- Glottolog uses “languoids”, usually understood as a cover term for languages, language families and dialects, useful for unclear cases
- Sometimes skepticism on feasibility of good definitions for language, lang. family, dialect
- Good/Cysow attempt theoretical underpinning
This is not usable, already for ontological reasons
Whatever languages are, they are not entities that contain their own names as one of their components

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

- Linguistics can and should define these terms
- At least a pragmatic framework for a standard
- Sure, one has to recognize different criteria for languages – (1) linguistic (mutual intelligibility) and (2) socio-politico-cultural (group identity)
- The linguistic definition of language is more fundamental (“l-languages” are basic)
- Also “s-languages” (on s/p/c-grounds) may merit a three letter code in ISO 639-3

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

- In ISO 639-3 there are “macrolanguage”-codes (cases, e.g.: Arabic, Chinese, Norwegian)
- Pragmatic solutions, but do not fully reflect real the social & linguistic situations
- We need a conceptual framework, starting with answering: what is a language?
- Languages are not systems or similar, they are SETS of individual ‘means of communication’ (“idiolects”, one speaker uses several)

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

- A feasible framework starts from a definition of mutually intelligibility (m.i.) between **idiolects**
- Still, some details need clarification:
 - “understand” (is probably gradual and thus needs to be quantified or tested by a standard test)
 - “without learning” etc. – difficult to test: often passive knowledge of other varieties is pervasive
 - “trans-medial correspondence conventions” are needed for written or whistled, drummed etc. forms

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

It is useful and possible to define:

- Chain of m.i. between two idiolects
A sequence with m.i. between adjacent members
- Linguistically defined language at a point in time (l-s-language)
Largest set of m.i.-chained idiolects at a point in time
- Linguistically defined language through time
Largest set of m.i.-chained idiolects so that no two different l-s-languages are subsets

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

It is useful and possible to define:

- Variety: a largest subset of a language delineated by both external and structural criteria

External: e.g.: apart medium (e.g. writing); use in a certain type of situation (time, formality etc.); speakers share certain distinctive properties (social, geographical group)

Possibly, the definition needs to include provision for fuzziness, using a prototypical small subset

Even without fuzziness, varieties may overlap

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

It is useful and possible to define:

- L1 descends from L2: m.i.-chain through time
- Language family: largest set of l-s-languages that all descend from an ancestor l-s-language
- A languoid at a time t is either
 - a. an l-s-language at t, or
 - b. a variety of a l-s-language at t, or
 - c. a language family at t
- Languoids are ontologically heterogeneous

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

What is the meaning of names of languages?

- English refers to the language named “English”
- ... and that is spoken by the majority of the population of the UK, the USA, Australia, ...
- So at least one name, (location of) speakers are the “defining” (better: identifying) criteria
- Additional properties: number of speakers, other names, belonging to a language family, structural characteristics, historical origin ...

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5) Towards a topology of languages

- We need more sophisticated terminologies to account for the topology of languages
- For example T. Kaufmann's (1990) proposals:
 - Families — languages — dialects:***
paradigmatic and most common case
Some languages are ***dialect chains*** (serial intell.)
 - Language areas and emergent languages:***
clear boundaries but high intelligibility
 - Language complexes with virtual languages:***
dialect chains with subsets functioning as languages

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6) Multidimensional linguistic variation

Dimensions of linguistic variation:

- Space (dialects, over-regional standard varieties)
- Time (epochs, periods, stages)
- Social groups (sociolects of several different types)
- Medium (oral, written, signed, whistled, drummed...)
- Situation (registers of different formality)
- Individual (“personal varieties”~ traditional “idiolects”)
- (Possibly) proficiency (for learners varieties of different stages, motherese and similar)

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7) Conclusions

- A pragmatic labelling system is essential
- Currently no way around ISO 639 for languages
- Glottolog could complement / supersede it
- **Experts panel** for sound review process is **needed**
- The topology of languages is more complex than “family” – “language” – “dialect”
- A sound pragmatic conceptual framework for “languages” and other types of “langoids” is possible
- Language internal variation is multidimensional

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2) The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms

View by:

639-3 639-2/639-5 639-1 Name Scope Type Starting with

See also: Library of Congress [ISO 639-2 Registration Authority](#) (which is the primary authority for Parts 1 and 2 of the standard) and [ISO 639-5 Registration Authority](#). These sites are the definitive sources in the case of a discrepancy with this site.

See also [Retired Code Elements Index](#)

639-3	639-2/ 639-5	639-1	Language Name	Scope	Type	
dgc			Casiguran Dumagat Agta	Individual	Living	more ...
spa	spa	es	Castilian	Individual	Living	more ...
asc			Casuarina Coast Asmat	Individual	Living	more ...
cat	cat	ca	Catalan	Individual	Living	more ...
csc			Catalan Sign Language	Individual	Living	more ...
chc			Catawba	Individual	Extinct	more ...
cca			Cauca	Individual	Extinct	more ...
	cau		Caucasian languages	Collective		more ...
cav			Cavineña	Individual	Living	more ...
cyb			Cayubaba	Individual	Extinct	more ...
cay			Cayuga	Individual	Living	more ...
xcy			Cayuse	Individual	Extinct	more ...

2) The ISO 639 standards and their criticisms

Change request documentation for: 2014-042

ISO 639-3 Home
Contact

Code Tables
Language codes
Macrolanguage mappings
Download

Code Changes
Change management
Submitting change requests
Change request index

Related Pages
Relationship to other parts of ISO 639

Change request: [2014-042.pdf](#)

Requested change:

1. Affected language identifier: [aam](#) (Aramanik)

Change type: Merge

Retirement remedy: [Merged into Aasax \[aas\]](#)

Old value: Aramanik

Outcome: Adopted

2. Affected language identifier: [aas](#) (Aasáx)

Change type: Update

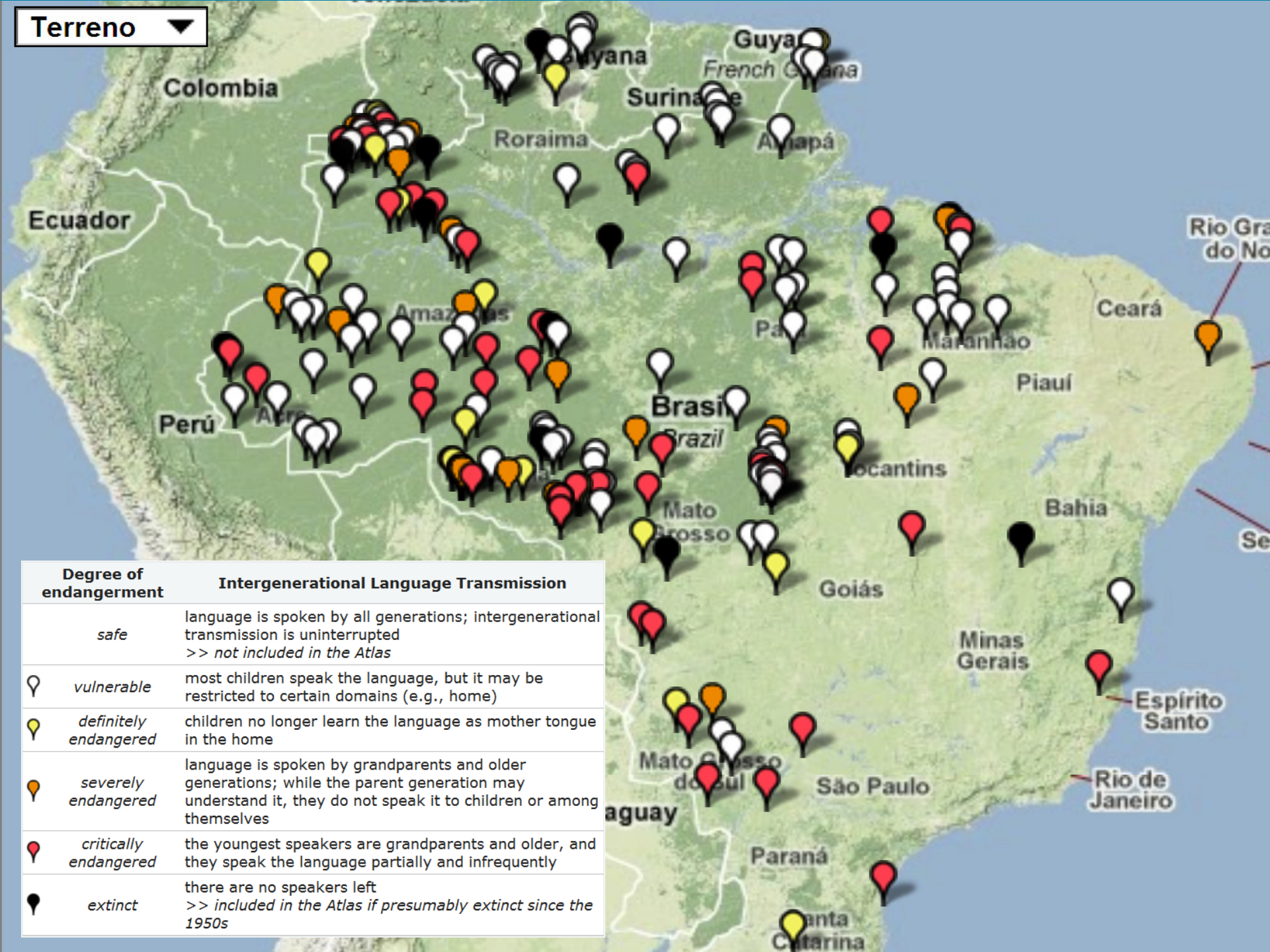
Change attribute: The proposed change is a change (expansion) in Denotation, from the merging of another code element into this code element






Old value: Aasax

Outcome: Adopted

Questions/Comments: iso639-3@sil.org

Terreno ▼



Degree of endangerment	Intergenerational Language Transmission
safe	language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted >> <i>not included in the Atlas</i>
 vulnerable	most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)
 definitely endangered	children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home
 severely endangered	language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves
 critically endangered	the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
 extinct	there are no speakers left >> <i>included in the Atlas if presumably extinct since the 1950s</i>

Names Codes

Node Info

wger

Name: West Germanic

Code: wger

Type: Subgroup

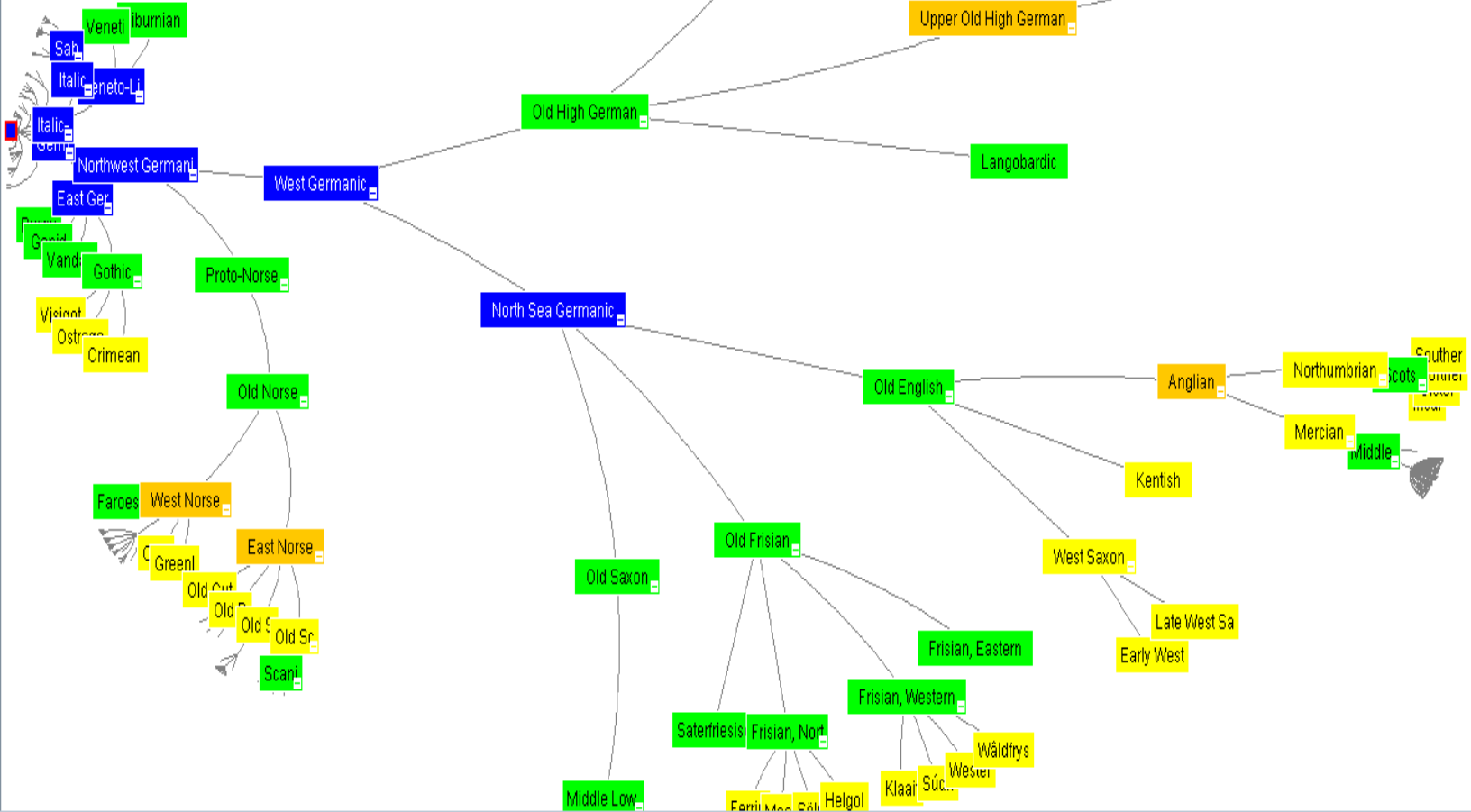
Child Langs: 52

Extinct: 9

Nearly Extinct: 3

Bibliography:

Multiple sources Integrated by
The LINGUIST List.



Tsakonian [aka *Tsaconia*, *Tsakonia*,]

Classification: Indo-European · threatened

Description

Samples

Resources

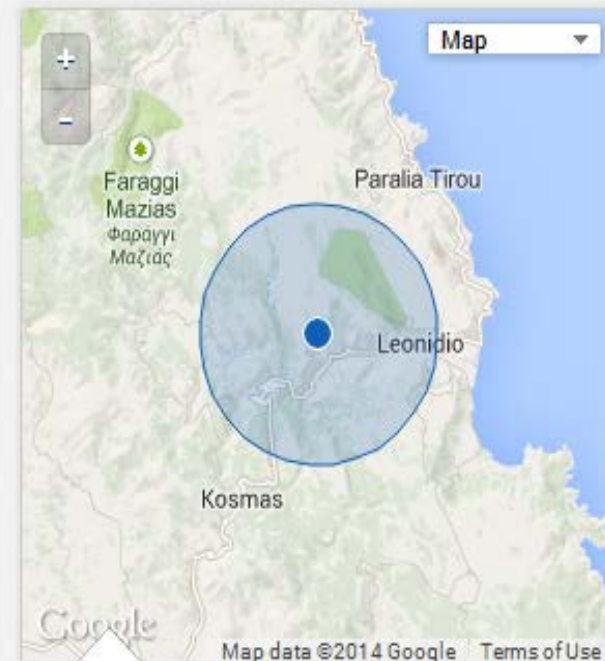
Activity

Bibliography

Subscribe

Language metadata

ALSO KNOWN AS	Tsaconia, Tsakonia
CLASSIFICATION	Indo-European, Hellenic, Archaic Greek, Northern Greek, West Greek, Northwest Greek, Doric, Laconian
CODE AUTHORITY	ISO 639-3
LANGUAGE CODE	tsd
VARIANTS & DIALECTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Southern Tsakonian• Propontis Tsakonian• Northern Tsakonian
DOWNLOAD	As csv ▾
MORE RESOURCES	OLAC search



LOCATION INFORMATION

COORDINATES [37.1712,22.7911](#)

[COMPARE SOURCES \(1\)](#)

Information from: "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger". Christopher Moseley · UNESCO Publishing

52-ACB-dkk	meissnisch	<i>including nord-meissnisch... west-meissnisch... süd-meissnisch... ost-meissnisch, meissen+ dresden</i> ▶ a key area in the historical development of formal and generalised German (see <i>Hochdeutsch-F.</i> and <i>Hochdeutsch-G.</i> below). ; as settlers speaking northern, central and southern idioms of German (see <i>Deutsch-N.</i> , <i>Deutsch-C.</i> , <i>Deutsch-S.</i>) converged in Saxony during the eastward colonisation of Slav-speaking areas, the Elbe valley around Meissen and Dresden became a focal-point for the development of a compromise written and spoken form of the German language in the late Middle Ages. ⊕ Mulde valley (Grimma... Lunzenau)... Elbe valley (Meissen... Dresden... Pirna)	(Sachsen)
52-ACB-dkl	böhmisch-N.	"bohemian german"-N. ⊕ Erzgebirge-E. mountains: Chomutov, Komotau... Děčín, Tetschen ¶ most speakers dispersed to Germany in or after 1945	Czech Rep. (Severočeský) 3*
52-ACB-dl	hochdeutsch-F.	high-german , "formal german", "standard german", gepflegtes hochdeutsch (=«cultivated high german»), deutsche schriftsprache (=«german written language»), deutsche hochsprache (=«german high language»), deutsche literatursprache (=«german literary language»), bühnendeutsch (=«stage german»), deutsche standardsprache (=«german standard language»); einheits-sprache (= «unity language»), part of neu-hochdeutsch, "new high german" ; the development of a compromise speech-form (<i>Ausgleichssprache</i>) based on converging forms of German in Thüringen and Sachsen culminated in the 14 th cent. written language of the imperial chancellery in Prague, which was in turn consolidated in the written language of the Meissen, Dresden and other Saxon and Thüringian chancelleries, and of the universities of Leipzig and Wittenberg. The determining event for the establishment of modern standard German was the publication of Luther's translation of the Bible in the early 16 th cent. To the "national" idioms listed below should be added the written idioms of <i>Hochdeutsch</i> (often archaic or influence < other German or non-German idioms) which correspond to many of idioms of <i>Auswanderungsdeutsch</i> (<i>Émigré German</i>). Idioms are listed below for the countries where German is currently an official language	A Germany, A Austria; formerly also (A) Austro-Hungarian Empire; Italy (A Südtirol; Alto-Adige); A Switzerland; A Liechtenstein; A Luxemburg; Belgium (A Liège-E.); formerly also France (A) Alsace; (A) Lorraine-N.) 7
52-ACB-dla	bundesdeutsch+ reichsdeutsch-F.	"formal german of Germany", including present-day bundesdeutsch, "federal german", "formal german of German Federal Republic"... and recent d.d.r.-deutsch, "g.d.r. german"; "formal german of East Germany" and preceded historically by n.s.-deutsch, "national socialist	Germany

Languages

Showing 1 to 100 of 7,816 entries

← Previous

1

2

3

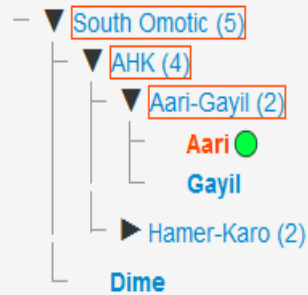
4

5

Next →



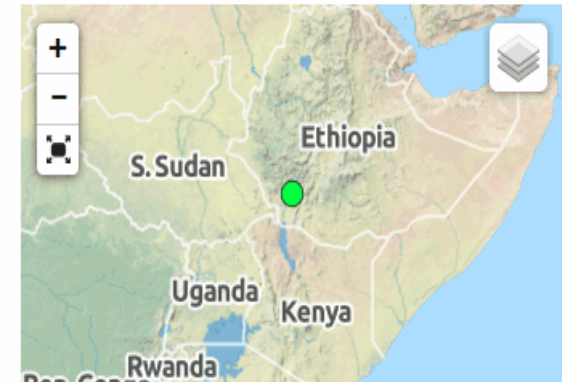
Glottocode ▲	Name ◆	Top-level family ◆	ISO-639-3 ◆	Macro-area	Child dialects ◆	Latitude ◆	Longitude ▲
<input type="text" value="Search"/>	<input type="text" value="Search"/>	<input type="text" value="Search"/>	<input type="text" value="Search"/>	--any-- ▼	<input type="text" value="Search"/>	<input type="text" value="Search"/>	<input type="text" value="Search"/>
aari1239	Aari	South Omotic	aiw	Africa	0	5.95	36.57
aasa1238	Aasax	Afro-Asiatic	aas	Africa	0	-4.01	36.86
abad1241	Abadi	Austronesian	kbt	Papunesia	0	-9.03	146.99
abag1245	Abaga	Nuclear Trans New Guinea	abg	Papunesia	0	-6.12	145.66
abai1240	Abai Sungai	Austronesian	abf	Papunesia	0	5.55	118.31
abai1241	Abai Tubu-Abai Sembuak	Austronesian		Papunesia	0		
aban1242	Abanyom	Atlantic-Congo	abm	Africa	0	6.31	8.63
abar1238	Abar	Atlantic-Congo	mij	Africa	0	6.58	10.23
abau1245	Abau	Sepik	aau	Papunesia	0	-3.97	141.32
abaz1241	Abaza	Abkhaz-Adyge	abq	Eurasia	3	41.12	42.73
abee1242	Abe	Atlantic-Congo	aba	Africa	4	5.60	-4.38
aben1249	Abenlen Ayta	Austronesian	abp	Papunesia	0	15.41	120.20
abid1235	Abidji	Atlantic-Congo	abi	Africa	2	5.66	-4.58
abin1243	Abinomn		bsa	Papunesia	0	-2.92	138.89
abip1241	Abipon	Guaicuruan	axb	South America	0	-29.00	-61.00

Language: Aari Classification [open Aari](#)[expand all](#)[collapse all](#)

Subclassification references

- [Jordan, Linda and Magnusson, Carol and Mohammed, Hussein 2013](#)
- [Tsuge, Yoichi 1996](#)

Map

[show big map](#)

Countries






Links

Alternative names

References

Showing 1 to 30 of 30 entries

[← Previous](#) 1 [Next →](#)

Details 	Name	Title	ca	Year	Pages	Doctype	ca	Provider	da
	<input type="text" value="Search"/>	<input type="text" value="Search"/>		<input type="text" value="Search"/>	<input type="text" value="Search"/>	--any-- 		--any-- 	
more	Naty, Alexander 1992	The culture of powerlessness and the spirit of rebellion among the Aari people of southwest Ethiopia		1992	700	ethnographic		eball, hh	
more	Tucker, Archibald N. and Ryan, Margaret A. 1966	Linguistic Analyses: The Non-Bantu Languages of North-Eastern Africa		1966	634	minimal, overview		eball, guldemann, tsuge	

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

- A feasible framework starts from a definition of mutually intelligibility (m.i.) between 2 idiolects
- Two idiolects I1 used by Speaker Sp1 and I2 used by Sp2 are M.I. iff the two speakers Sp1 using I1 and Sp2 using I2 are both able to understand one another only on the basis of their own respective knowledge of their own idiolect (Sp1 of I1 and Sp2 of I2) and possibly some trans-medial correspondence conventions.

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

- Chain of m.i. between two idiolects
- A set of idiolects is a chain of M.I. between I_a and I_z iff it can be exhaustively ordered into a sequence so that between all two adjacent members I_i and I_j of the chain exists M.I. and I_a is the first member and I_z the last member of that sequence.

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

- Linguistically defined language at a point in time (*l-s-language*)
- A non-empty set of idiolects L is an L-s-Language at a point in time t iff it is a largest set so that all elements of L are used at t and between any two l_i and l_j elements of L , there exists a chain of M.I. of elements of L

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

- Linguistically defined language through time
- A non-empty set of idiolects L is an L-t-Language iff it is a largest set so that between any two l_i and l_j elements of L , there exists a chain of idiolects, and all idiolects are used between two points in time t_1 and t_2 , and there neither at t_1 nor at t_2 nor at any point in time between there are two different L-s-Languages that are both a subset of L .

4) Languages and “languoids” – what are they?

- Variety
- A non-empty set of idiolects L1 is a variety of a L-t-Language L2 iff L1 is a subset of L2 that can be set apart from other elements of the language by both (a) and (b):
 - a) there is a set of shared external properties of the elements of L1 that sets them apart from other elements of L2, and
 - b) the idiolects share a significant amount of distinctive structural properties