Pluricentric languages and Wikipedia – where to draw the line… and where not to

Philip Kopetzky (philip.kopetzky@gmail.com)

User:Braveheart, member of Wikimedia Austria

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Introduction

- Term “pluricentric language” coined by William Stewart and Heinz Kloss in the late 1960s
- Definition of a pluricentric language (Clyne, 1992)
  - Several standard versions
  - Used across boundaries of individual political entities
- Almost all big languages are pluricentric
  - German, English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Hindustani, etc.
- With some notable exceptions
  - Russian, Japanese, Albanian
- Differentiation between asymmetrical and symmetrical pluricentric languages

Asymmetrical pluricentric languages

- Found wherever there is a dominant variety of the language
- Mostly due to a very large percentage of native speakers located in one country

  "*The norms of one national variety (or some national varieties) is afforded higher status than other varieties, internally and externally, than those of the others*" (Clyne, 1992)

- In some cases cultural influence of the dominant variety threatens the existence of smaller varieties

Examples in detail: German

“What divides Germans and Austrians is their common language” - unknown

- Variants:
  - German Standard German (D)
  - Austrian Standard German (A)
  - Swiss Standard German (CH)
- Distribution
  - D: 77 million (86 %)
  - A: 7.5 million (8 %)
  - CH: 5 million (6 %)

German speaking countries, D-A-CH.png, Immanuel Giel, CC-BY-SA 3.0

Asymmetrical examples in detail: German (2)

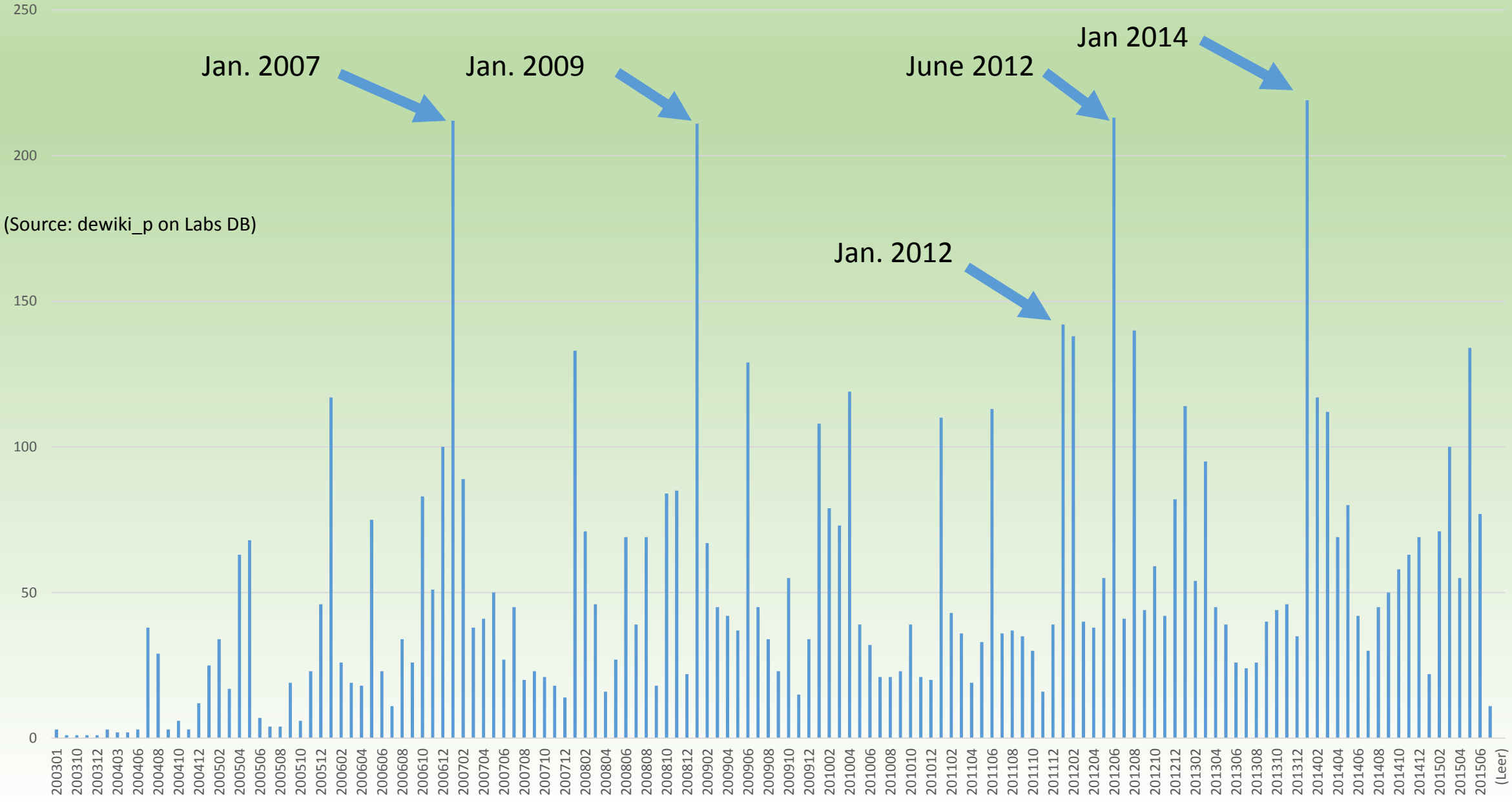
- Highly standardised language
  - Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung (Council for German Orthography)
    - Includes councillors from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, South Tyrol, Belgium and Liechtenstein
  - Duden as leading authority in Germany
  - Official “Austrian dictionary” for Austria and South Tyrol (since 1951)
  - “Swiss society for the german language” in Switzerland

- Several straw polls in Wikipedia tried to harmonise variants, but failed
- Typography and grammar in articles based on ties to a country ([[de:Wikipedia:Österreichbezogen]], [[de:Wikipedia:Schweizbezogen)]])

“Januar” vs. “Jänner”

- German for *January*
- “Jänner” as Austrian variant vs. “Januar” in Germany and Switzerland
- Straw poll in 2005 decided to keep the Austrian variant, limiting it to articles with ties to Austria
- Constant changes by German users from “Jänner” to “January”
- Despite having official guidelines ([[:de:Wikipedia:Datumskonventionen]]), number of changes stay the same over the years

Number of changes which state "Jänner" as reason for an edit by month



(Source: dewiki_p on Labs DB)

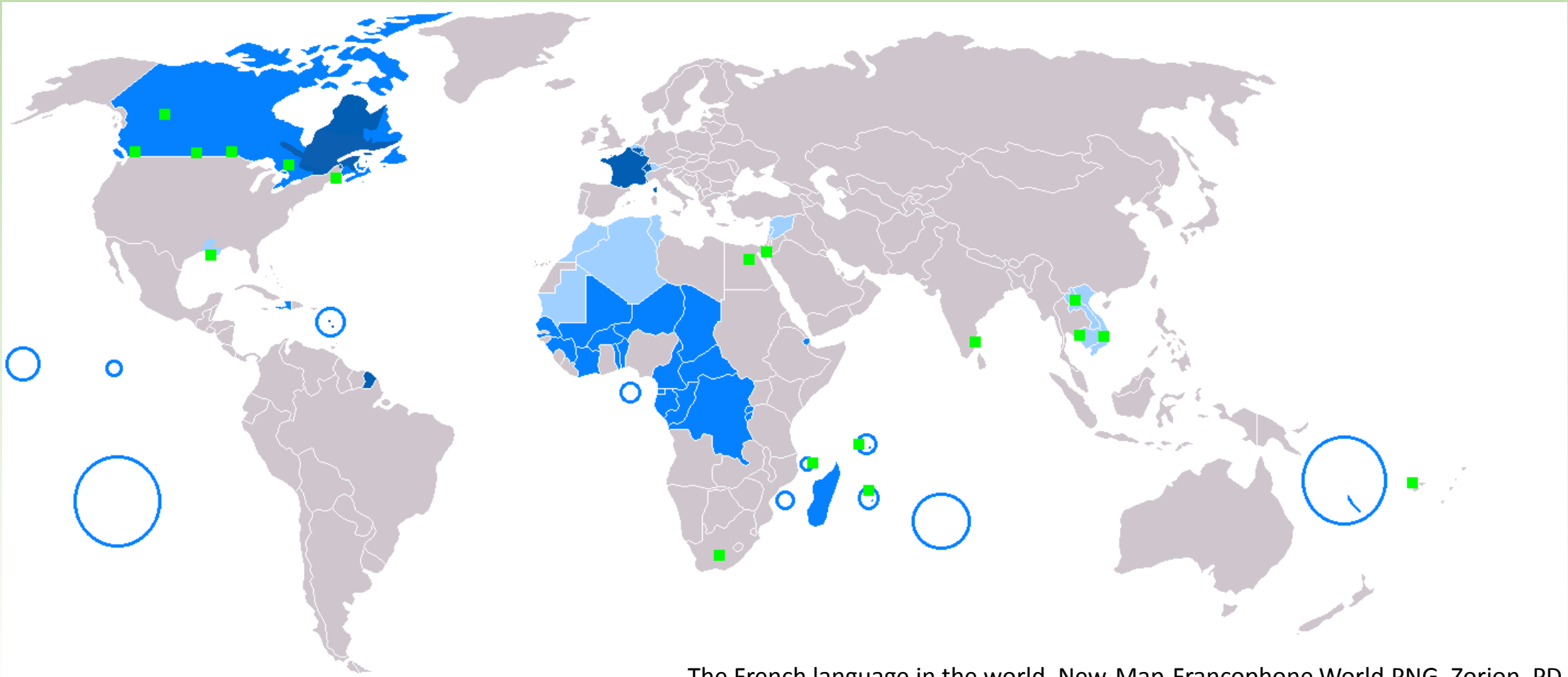
Why do conflicts arise to this day?

- Documentation of the guidelines not sufficient?
  - Traffic for those guidelines at around 8 hits per day in June 2015

- Knowledge of German as a pluricentric language not widely spread?
  - Objection raised that everything besides German Standard German is a dialect comparable to inner German regional dialects and therefore not compatible with Standard German

Examples in detail: French

- Francophone world



The French language in the world, New-Map-Francophone World.PNG, Zorion, PD-self

Examples in detail: French (2)

- About 80 million native speakers
- Dominant variant is the standardised variant of French in France
  - Controlled by the “Académie française“ (*French Academy*), founded in 1635
- Other standardised variants
  - Belgian French
  - Canadian French (regulated by the *Office québécois de la langue française*)
- Use of design theory „Principle of least astonishment” (POLA) in French Wikipedia also applies to wording in articles

A tale of chicory and ice hockey pucks

- Chicory: Commonly called “endive” in French, “chicon” used in Northern France and Belgium
- Settled by a straw poll in February 2007 regulating article names in the field of biology
- Arguments: POLA and a table comparing the use in various francophone countries combined with their population, among other arguments

Chicory, Witlof en wortel.jpg, Rasbak, CC-BY-SA 3.0

A tale of chicory and ice hockey pucks (2)

- Ice hockey pucks: Called “palet” in francophone Europe, “rondelle” in Quebec
- Modern ice hockey was invented in Quebec, therefore it has strong ties to this region
- POLA and the overwhelming majority that use “palet” decide this issue, accompanied by this table:

Pays (Country)	Population francophone	Palet	Rondelle
Québec	7 600 000		**OUI**
France	64 000 000	**OUI**	
Belgique	4 200 000	**OUI**	
Suisse	1 500 000	**OUI** (or “puck”)	
Totaux	77 300 000	69 700 000	7 600 000

What does this comparison tell us?

- Arguments for and against the use national variants in asymmetrical languages in Wikipedia
  - Standardising the language in Wikipedia according to the majority of readers makes it easier for most readers
    - … but does this apply to all articles? What about local themes? (Villages, regional politicians, etc.)
  - Fostering diversity in Wikipedia makes for happier users
    - … and even dictionaries in Germany are starting to accommodate other standard variants
  - Demotivating users from small user groups sounds like a bad idea
    - Who else is going to write about those regions in detail?

Symmetrical pluricentric languages

- Found wherever there are two or more centres who each use their own widely spread, standardised variant

- Often a product of the “heartland” of the language as one centre and another country with a large population as the other centre (Ammon, 2004)
  - Examples: Portuguese, English, Spanish

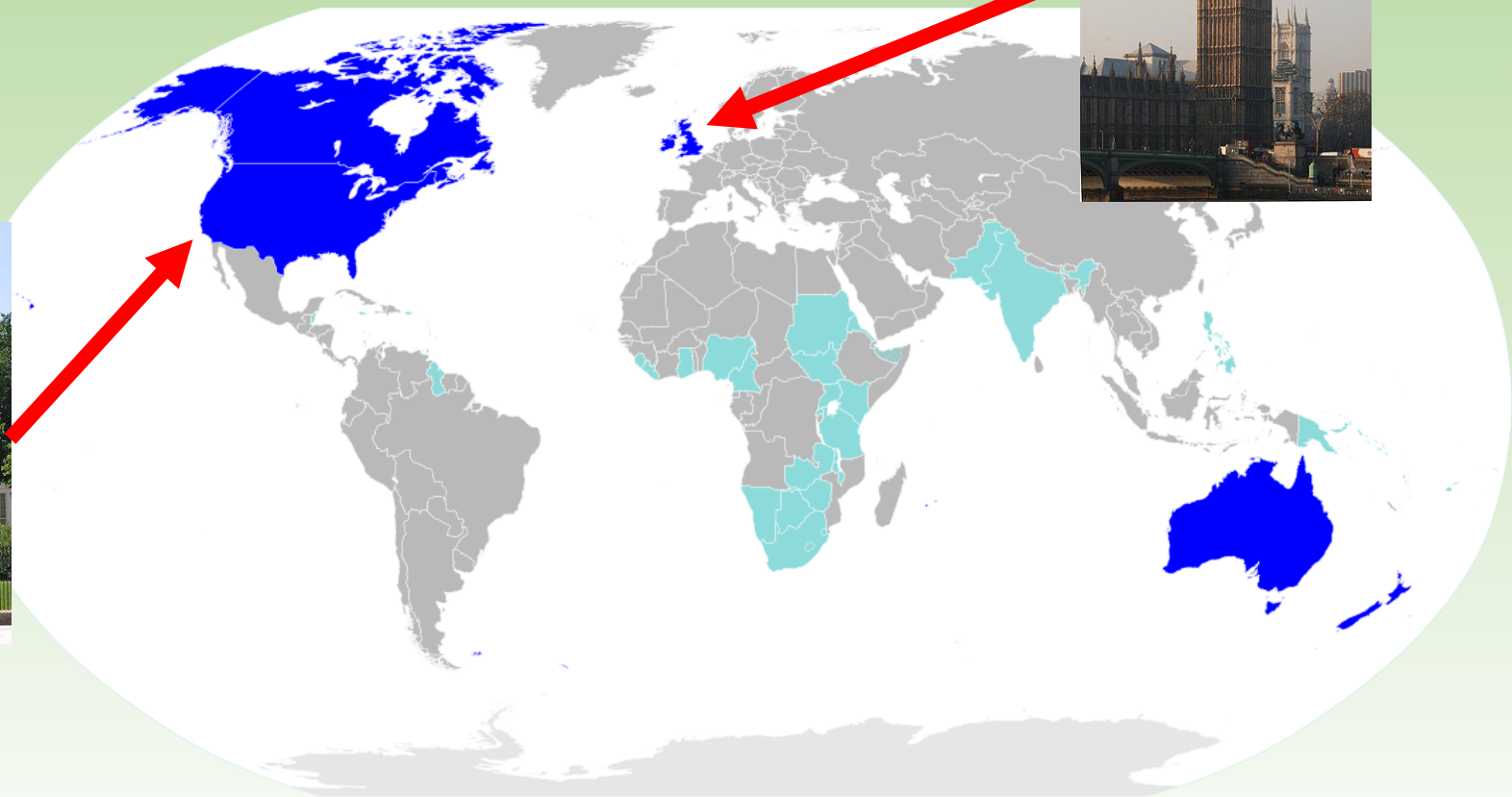
Examples in detail: English

- WP:TIES

Rebozo patterned ties, FeriadeRebozo2014 48.JPG, AlejandroLinaresGarcia, CC-BY-SA 4.0

Examples in detail: English

- WP:TIES



English language map, Anglospeak.svg, Shardz, PD-self / Whitehouse north.jpg, Alkivar, CC-BY-SA-3.0 / Big Ben 2007-1.jpg, Alvesgaspar, CC-BY-SA-3.0

Examples in detail: English (2)

- *"England and America are two countries divided by a common language."* – *Georg Bernard Shaw*

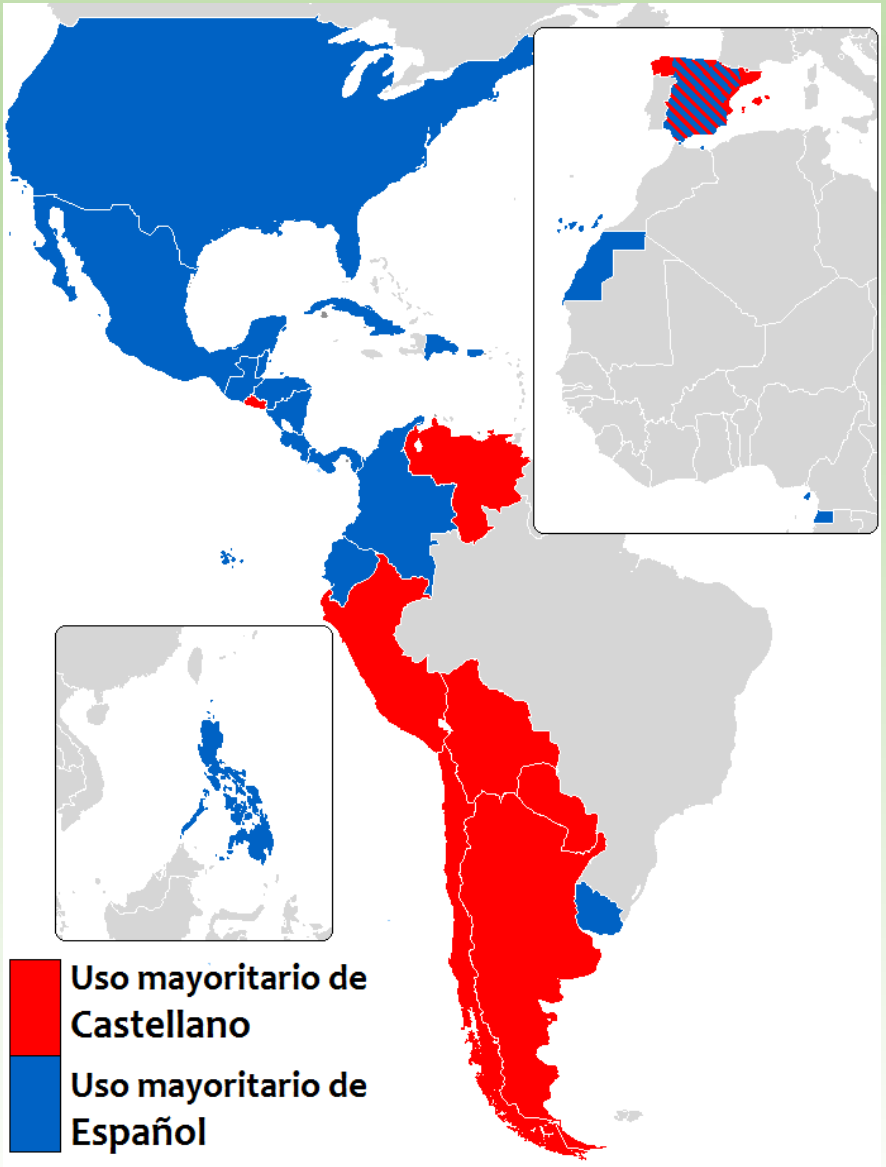
- WP:TIES
  - Defined as "*An article on a topic that has strong ties to a particular English-speaking nation should use the English of that nation*".
  - At the same time, no claim to any article according to [[en:Wikipedia:Ownership of articles]]
  - Grey / uncertain areas are common whenever two or more countries have strong ties to a topic
    - For example a Sherlock Holmes series produced in the United States

Examples in detail: English (3)

- Manual of style
  - Opportunities for commonality
  - Consistency within articles
  - Strong national ties to a topic
  - Retaining the existing variety
- Sheer number of rules makes for a confusing interpretation of these guidelines
  - Most terms with differing vocabulary (like [[en:center]] and [[en:elevator]]) are written in American English

Spanish

- Use of the term “Castellano” in South America instead of “Idioma español”
- Political motives as reason for using one over the other?
- Traffic ratio of redirect “Castellano” to article “Idioma español” approx. 1:50 on Spanish Wikipedia
  (June 2015, Source: stats.grok.se)



Most commonly used name given to the Spanish Language, Castellano-Español.png, Bnwwf91, PD-self

Outlook

- Analysis of Wikipedia versions of regional dialects that don’t have a standardised written form
- Statistical analysis of article traffic based on the country/region of readers
- Viability of pluricentric languages with more than one Wikipedia version (e.g. Serbo-Croatian)

References / Further reading

- Ammon, de Gruyter, 2004, *Sociolinguistics / Soziolinguistik, Volume 1*, Berlin, ISBN 3-11-014189-2
- Clyne, Mouton de Gruyter, 1992, *Pluricentric Languages: Differing Norms in Different Nations*, Berlin, ISBN 3-11-012855-1
- Soares da Silva / Auer et al, de Gruyter, 2014, *Pluricentricity: Language Variation and Sociocognitive Dimensions*, Berlin/Boston, ISBN 978-11-030364-3

- Wikipedia (de,en,es,fr)

Discussion

Questions?

Comments?

Own experiences on this matter?