

“From the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean: the promises and pitfalls of areal linguistics”

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Almost a century has passed since Nikolai Trubetzkoy introduced the term *Sprachbund* (German for “linguistic league”) to describe geographical areas marked by convergence among languages which are not closely related. Yet even now, there is no agreement as to the criteria for linguistic areas. Consequently, some scholars of language contact have argued that the concept has outlived its usefulness and should be abandoned. Others acknowledge the difficulties in defining “contact zones”, but wish to maintain an areal dimension to the study of language change.

This talk surveys the history of research on linguistic areas, then turns to an examination of two examples which have been widely discussed in the literature: Europe as a linguistic area characterized typologically by “Standard Average European”, and the Caucasus. It is shown that all judgments of the extent and defining properties of these linguistic areas depend on the choice of languages taken as “central” or “core”, and furthermore that both membership in linguistic areas and areal features themselves can vary considerably over time. The evolution of the Indo-Iranian languages also raises the problem of distinguishing areal features from the vague, if widely invoked concept of “drift” or parallel innovation. It follows that any investigation of potential linguistic areas such as the Indian Ocean must avoid privileging certain languages (usually those associated with prestigious literary standards), while keeping in the foreground a diachronic perspective on contact and diffusion.