

# Harmonising Languages

This summer holiday I bicycled from Delft in Holland to Krakow in Poland. During the 2,100-kilometre trip I crossed three language barriers: German, Czech and Polish. Only in German am I sufficiently adept to read notes on food packaging and converse with the indigenous population. Czech and Polish, both Slavic languages, are incomprehensible to my Anglo-Saxon attuned ears. Who could have imagined, twenty years back, that Krakow could be reached from Delft without either a visa or confronting passport inspection and customs officials? Yet there you suddenly are, looking for buttermilk in a supermarket in a Czech suburb. Product specifications are printed in seven languages, but all central- and eastern European: Czech, Slovakian, Polish, Hungarian, Serbian, Bulgarian and Rumanian. Knowing that buttermilk sounds different from other dairy products when you shake the carton allows a sophisticated guess at the contents, but the chances of error are considerable.

The language of topographic maps also changes whenever a European border is crossed. This is a major source of error when applications require data from both sides, and could result in unnecessary injury or death in a calamity. It might also lead to economic loss, both undesirable and reprehensible in a globalised society. Differing formats, object definitions and map projections confuse emergency workers called upon to help colleagues abroad. Such differences may seem insignificant, but practice shows they hinder identification of access routes or risk sites such as fuel stations, causing life-threatening delay. So there's an urgent need to eliminate the present heterogeneity of topographic maps covering border areas and harmonise contents towards seamless integration.

In an accomplishment said to be unique in Europe, Kadaster, the official Netherlands cadastre tasked among other things with maintaining and distributing national topographic maps, has together with the National Mapping Agency of North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony (Germany) recently released a web service which seamlessly integrates topographic data on the boundary zone by bringing it all under the same coordinate system. Disaster managers benefit from such harmonisation of topographic data language, as do water managers and planners involved in creating newly built-up areas, such as business sites. This represents an important first step in full integration of cross-border geo-datasets. Kadaster is now seeking co-operation with the National Geographic Institute of Belgium to establish similar services by harmonising delimitation zones.

So if you're ever trying to buy buttermilk in central Europe, it's called 'podmáslí' in the Czech Republic and 'maślanka' in Poland. But, easier than learning the words by heart, why not transfer them from one reference system to the other using a dictionary?

---

<https://www.gim-international.com/content/article/harmonising-languages>

---