

Disentangling Genes, Geography, and Language

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It is often assumed that the genetic and linguistic relationships of populations should be correlated, but there are good reasons for thinking they may not be. Moreover, even if a correlation can be demonstrated, it may simply reflect an effect of geography: populations that are geographically close to one another tend to be genetically-related and they tend to speak related languages. How can the relative roles of geography and language on the genetic relationships of populations be determined? I shall discuss two broad approaches; the first makes use of quantitative estimates of linguistic relationships, which are obviously difficult to come by, but one source I will make use of in my presentation are the data underlying the World Atlas of Language Structures. The second approach is to take advantage of linguistic enclaves (i.e., populations speaking one language that are surrounded by populations speaking different languages) and ask which best explains their genetic relationships: geography or language? The overall conclusion from these analyses is that the data at present are too few to permit any overall conclusions, but with more linguistic and genetic data more definitive answers should be possible.