Two nations, one language? Controversies in variationist theory and practice (föredraget är på engelska)

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The study of national varieties is a cornerstone of English Studies today. One field, World Englishes, is entirely founded on the idea that each nation has the freedom to express itself in a unique way through its own type of English: what used to be "errors" and "deviations" from a given norm usually become the source of linguistic innovations in a new variety, i.e. a new norm. In this respect, national varieties exist a priori within a pluricentric model of English, with various linguistic centres and spheres of influence. One might rightfully say that for English each nation may construct its own variety.

It is interesting to see that other languages and philologies have different assumptions about national varieties and that the idea of ownership is compounded with value judgements. All too often, (potential) national varieties are seen as merely regional or dialectal versions of a more prestigious standard variety. German is an interesting case in point as the notion of a General German standard language is upheld to the present day, a concept that renders the English and German approaches quite incompatible.

The present talk highlights these and other qualitative differences in assessment of comparable linguistic situations in different languages. The situation is always the same: a former dialect continuum is broken up by a political border. By presenting the treatment of norm and standard from a cross-linguistic perspective, we can trace the cultural biases behind linguistic approaches. It is argued that the creation of special scenarios in philologies runs counter the idea of the uniformitarian hypothesis, i.e. that the principles of language change and maintenance are universal.