

Language and national borders do not always coincide

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In July 2014, the Norwich City football squad were involved in a slightly embarrassing situation during their pre-season tour in northern Italy.

One of the games they had arranged was called off by the Italian club involved, and a replacement fixture was rapidly arranged against another side.

NCFC reported that the rearranged match was to be played against an Italian Serie D side, Saint-Christophe Vallée d'Aoste. After Norwich had won 13-0, that Italian club complained that the match had not actually involved them at all but a scratch XI of local non-professionals: Norwich apologised for the misunderstanding. I wonder if there were some language difficulties in all this, because there is something linguistically rather interesting about that area of Italy.

You may have noticed that the name of that local football club is not Italian but French: vallée is the French word for valley. This is because French is the official language in the area.

The indigenous local language, however, is not French or Italian but Franco-Provençal, a now endangered language originally spoken all over western Switzerland, eastern France and north-



■ Tennis star Rafa Nadal speaks Catalan, which is the local language of his home, Majorca.

Picture: PA

western Italy. Monolingual English speakers often assume when we are travelling that language and national boundaries coincide.

We travel to Majorca and, thinking that Majorca is in Spain, get ourselves a Spanish phrase book. That's OK – everyone can speak Spanish there. But the local language is not Spanish but Catalan, as shown for example by Majorcan tennis star Rafa Nadal.

Tourists skiing in St Moritz or Davos may not realise that the local language there is Romansch, not German or Italian. People holidaying in the South Tyrol in northern Italy may not pick up on the fact that the locals are German-speaking, though they should because all the place-names are German. Most European coun-

tries have sizeable indigenous linguistic minorities. Hungarian is the native language of southern Slovakia as well as extensive areas of central Romania. There are large regions of Finland where people speak Swedish. France has citizens whose mother tongue is Dutch, German, Breton, Basque, Catalan or Provençal. In parts of southern Italy, Greek and Albanian are still spoken natively. And Greece has speakers of Albanian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Romany and Rumanian.

It is communities like these that the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is intended to help and protect. Sadly, France and Italy have not ratified the Charter yet, and Greece hasn't even signed it. It's about time they did.