Certification course for Myanmar Language Studies:

"Language and society in Myanmar and beyond"

July 26 - August 20, 2021

Mo, We, Fr 2pm - 3pm (Myanmar time)

Lesson 2: Basic linguistic categories - general

PD Dr. Mathias Jenny, University of Zurich, Switzerland

www.mathiasjenny.ch

mj@mathiasjenny.ch

Key words

- phonology
- morphology
- syntax

- semantics
- pragmatics
- lexicon

- diachronic vs. synchronic

Phonology

Phonology is about the **sound system of a language**

- Which sounds are present and relevant in a language
  (consonants, vowels, tones, stress)

- How do the sounds behave in spoken language

A sound used in a language to distinguish words (meanings) is called a phoneme:

English			
to	**d**o	→	/d/ is different from /t/
ba**d**	ba**t**	→	/d/ is different from /t/
zip	**s**ip	→	/z/ is different from /s/
port	s**p**ort	→	[pʰ] is not different from [p]

In Thai, *pâː* is 'aunt' and *pʰâː* is 'cloth'

→   aspiration is important

In Chinese, *mā* 'mother' is different from *mǎ* 'horse'

→   tones (pitch and contour) are important

In Mon, *pat* 'week' is different from *pa̤t* 'gong'

→   phonation (breathy voice and clear voice) is important

Each language has its own phonological system, that means, each language has specific rules about what sounds are important to distinguish meaning and how these sounds are combined.

In linguistics, we use the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to write the sounds found in any language.

Check the symbols and sounds here:
https://www.internationalphoneticalphabet.org/ipa-sounds/ipa-chart-with-sounds/

Morphology

Morphology is about the **structure of words**

Inflection is about how **words change** according to the grammatical context

I walk   *she walks*   *we walked*   *you are walking*

Derivation is about how **new words** are formed

love   *lovely*   *beloved*   *loveable*   *lover*

In order to describe the morphology of a language, we have to know how to define "word" in the language we are describing.

How many words are the following?

blackboard	*'This is a very blackboard.'
bus driver	'a big bus driver' - what is 'big'?
English teacher	how many accents?
can't - cannot	'Can't you come?' - 'Can you not come?'
don't - do not	'Don't you know?' - 'Do you not know?'

Defining a "word" in any language is not always easy!

Syntax

Syntax is about how words are combined into sentences:

The dog is eating a bone.   **Subject - Verb - Object (SVO)**

the big house   **Article - Adjective - Noun (Art-Adj-N)**

on the table   **Preposition - Article - Noun (Prep-Art-N)**

Rice he doesn't like.   **Object - Subject - Verb (OSV)**

*He rice doesn't like.   **Subject - Object - Verb (SOV)**

Semantics and pragmatics

Semantics is about the (literal) meanings of words and expressions.

It is hot in this room. → **information about the temperature**

Pragmatics is about the actual use of words and expressions.

It is hot in this room. → **request for someone to open the windows**

Semantics and pragmatics may be more or less different among different speakers of the same language.

Lexicon

All sound-meaning combinations (words, idioms, patterns) of a language are listed in the lexicon of the language.

The lexicon lists information about the items listed, such as part of speech (noun, verb, adjective, etc.), meaning, grammar (e.g. *go* has the past tense *went*).

The lexicon is not a written book, but something mental (in the brains of the people speaking the language).

Synchronic linguistics

... takes data from different sources and looks at what languages are like today, finds and describes structures in phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, lexicon.

Sources for synchronic linguistics include

- published texts (newspapers, stories, songs, ...)
- recordings from fieldwork
- experiments

Synchronic linguistics looks at the distribution of language features around the world, e.g. **tones**

Thai:	*maj*	*màj*	*mâj*	*máj*	*mǎj*
	'microphone'	'new'	'not'	'or not?'	'silk'

or **classifiers**
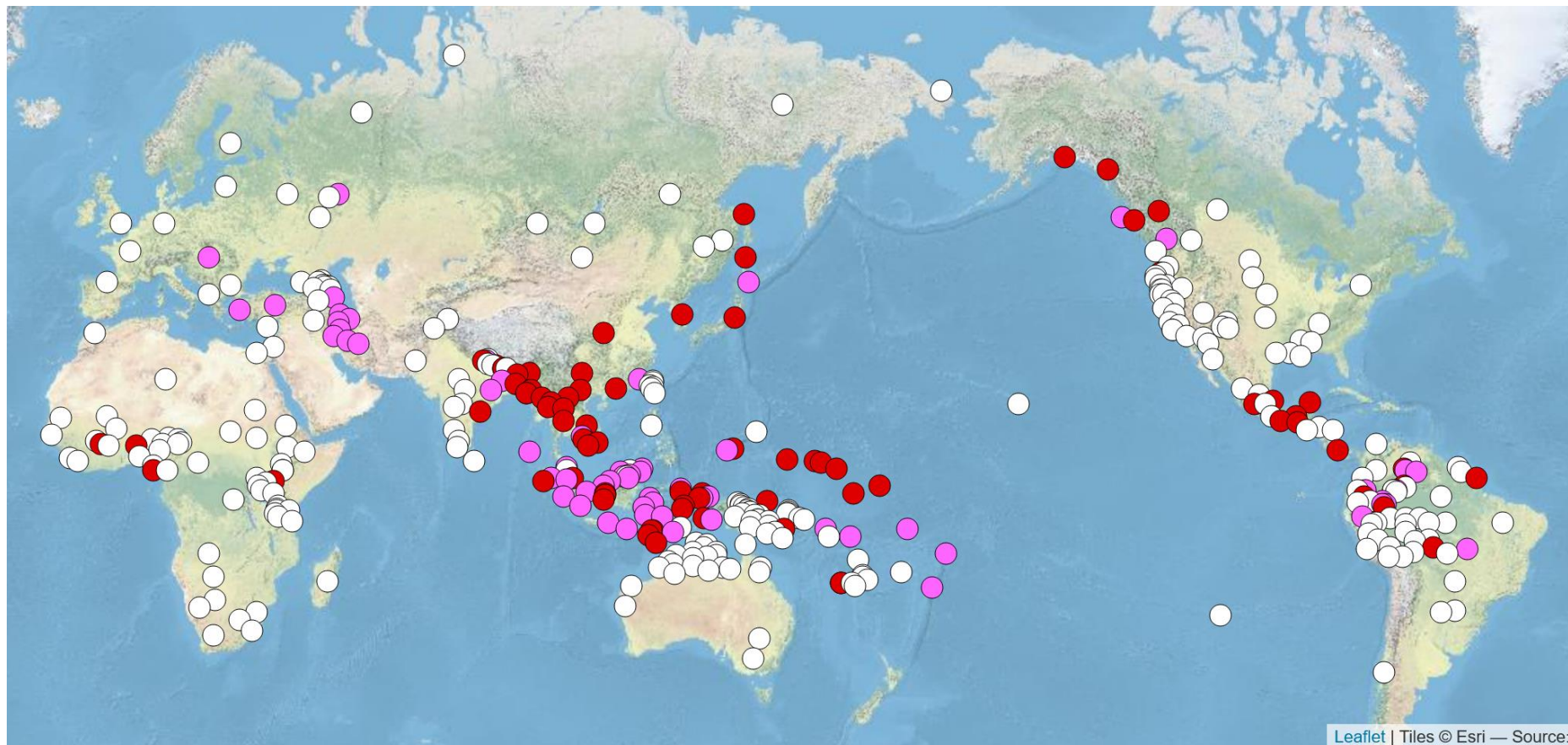
Thai: *bâːn sɔ̌ːŋ **lǎŋ.*** 'two houses' (not **sɔ̌ːŋ bâːn*)
*pʰûən sɔ̌ːŋ **kʰon*** 'two friends' (not **sɔ̌ːŋ pʰûən*)

... or word order: SVO, SOV, VSO
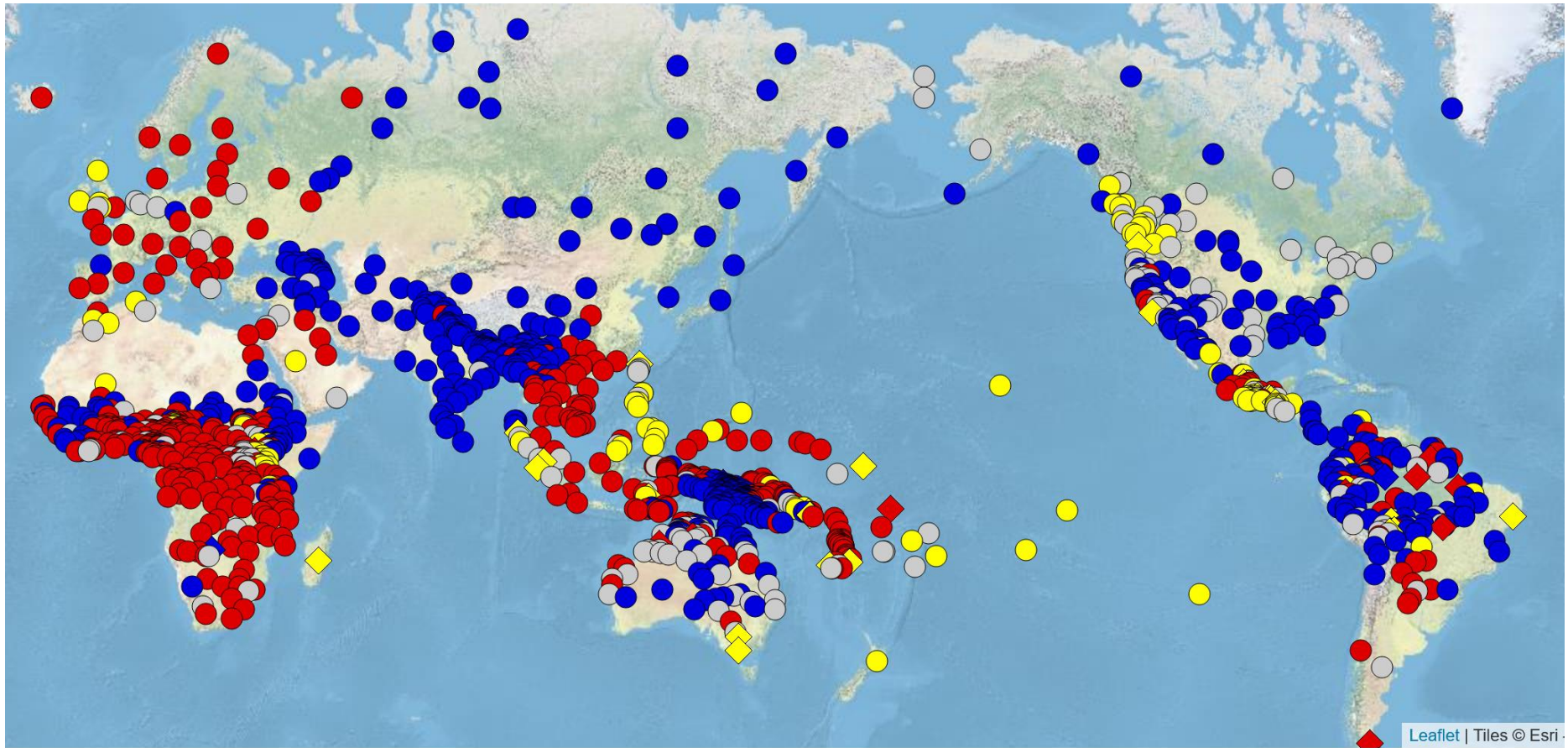
The girl eats rice.

The girl rice eats.
Rice the girl eats.

Eats the girl rice.
Eats rice the girl.

Synchronic linguistics helps us understand

... how human languages are similar and different

... how geography interacts with the distribution of language features
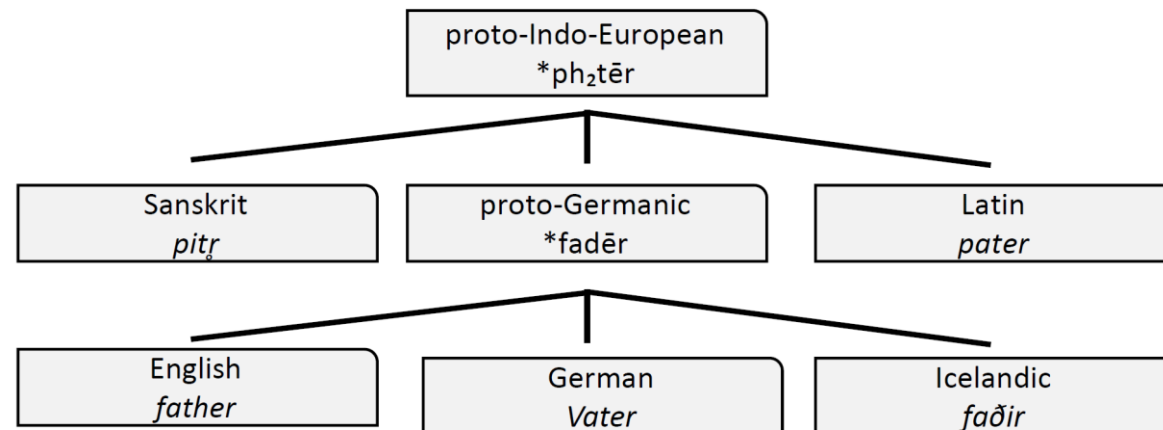
... how ideas are expressed in human societies.

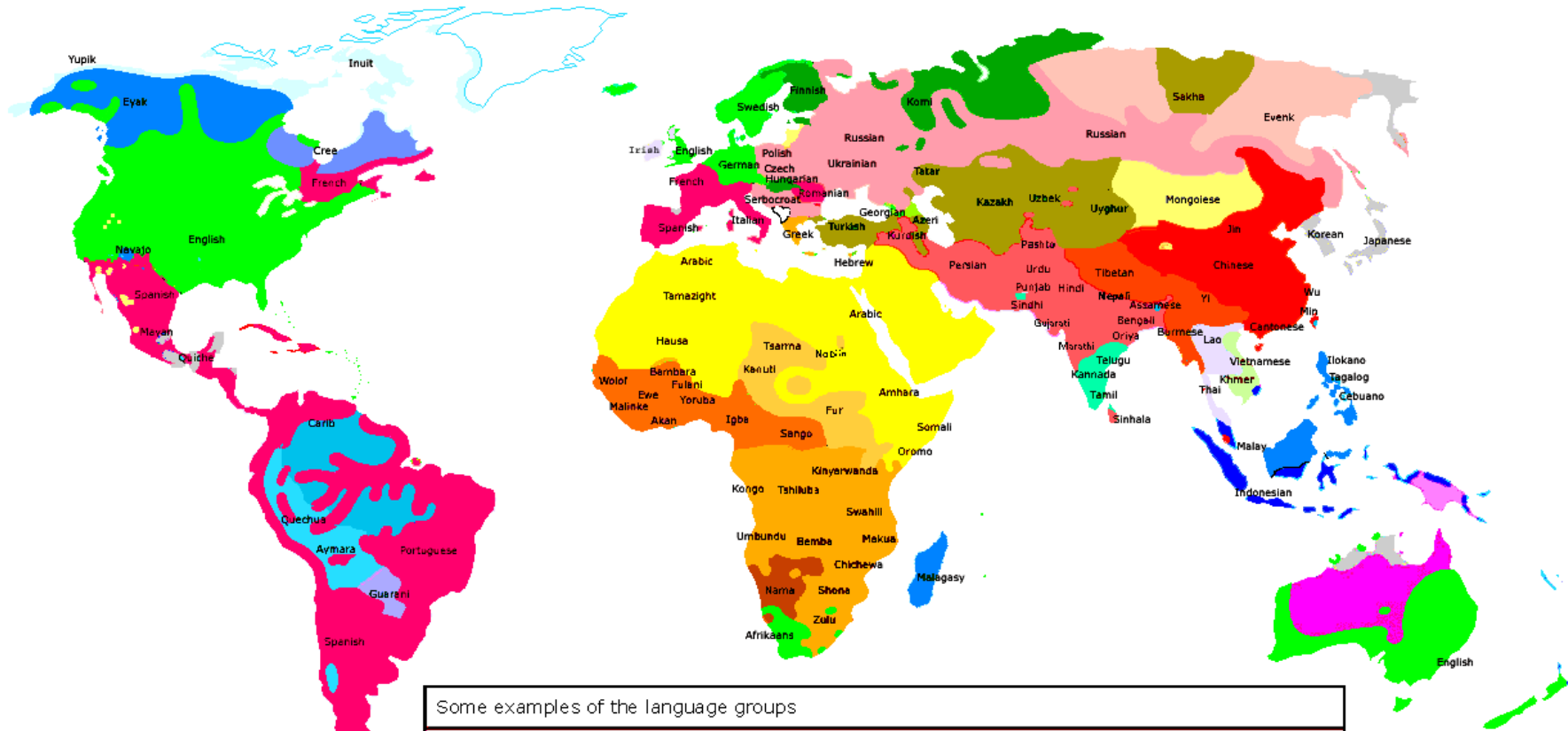... how culture and language are related.

Diachronic linguistics

Comparing language data (e.g. words, grammar) to reconstruct older stages of languages and their histories.

This allows to find **language families**, that is, groups of languages that have the same origin.

Language families

Some examples of the language groups

- Afro-Asiatic

- Niger-Congo
- Bantu
- Nilo-Saharan
- Khoisan
  Indo-European
- Germanic
- Albanic
- Romance
- Slavic
- Indo-Iranian
- Baltic
- Caucasian

Altaic
- Turkic
- Mongolic
- East Siberian languages

- Uralic

- Dravidian

Sino-Tibetan
- Chinese
- Burmese-Tibetan

Austro-Asiatic
Austronesian
- Borneo-Philippines/Formosan
- Nuclear Malayo-Polynesian
- Papuan
- Pama-Ngyungan
- Tai-Kadal

- Isolate

- Na-Déne
- Eskimo-Aleut
  American Indian
- Algic
- Uto-Aztecan
- Mayan
- Andean
- Tupian
- Brasilian indigenous

Reconstructing older stages of languages and their history helps us understand

- Where the people of the original language lived

If we can reconstruct words for 'sea' and 'snow', the language was spoken in a cold area near a sea.

If we can reconstruct words for 'banana', 'elephant' and 'tiger', but not for 'snow', it was probably spoken in a tropical region.

- What the culture of the original people was like

If we can reconstruct words for 'wheel' and 'wagon' and 'horse', we know how the people moved around.

If we can reconstruct words for 'king, chief' and 'servant', we know something about the social structure of the original people.

- Where/when the people migrated

If we see where languages that belong to the same family are spoken, we can find out where they came from and where they went.

In the next lesson we take a closer look at Myanmar and its neighbors.