

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)

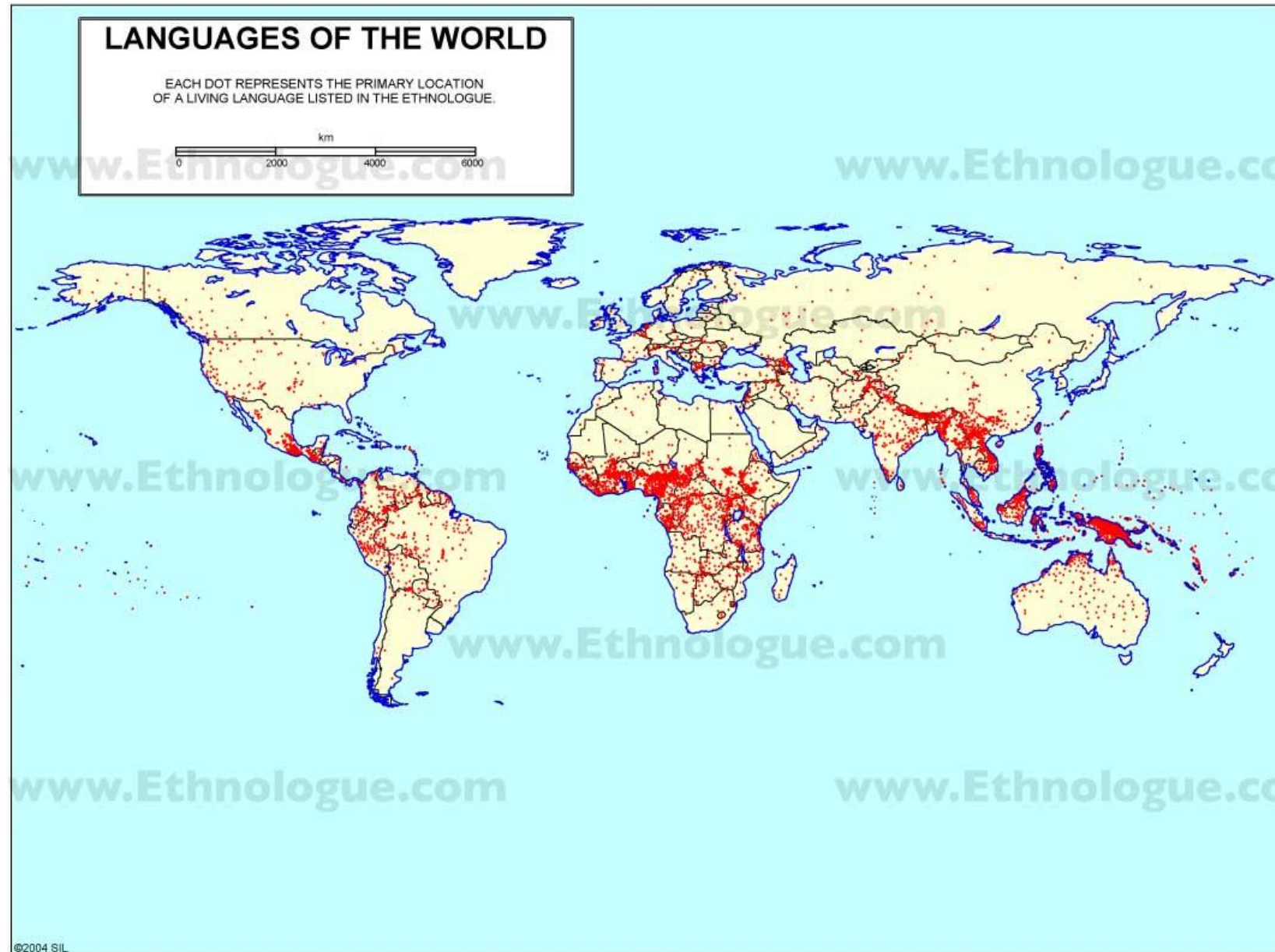
## **Lesson 10: Non-national languages - general**

**PD Dr. Mathias Jenny, University of Zurich, Switzerland**

[www.mathiasjenny.ch](http://www.mathiasjenny.ch)

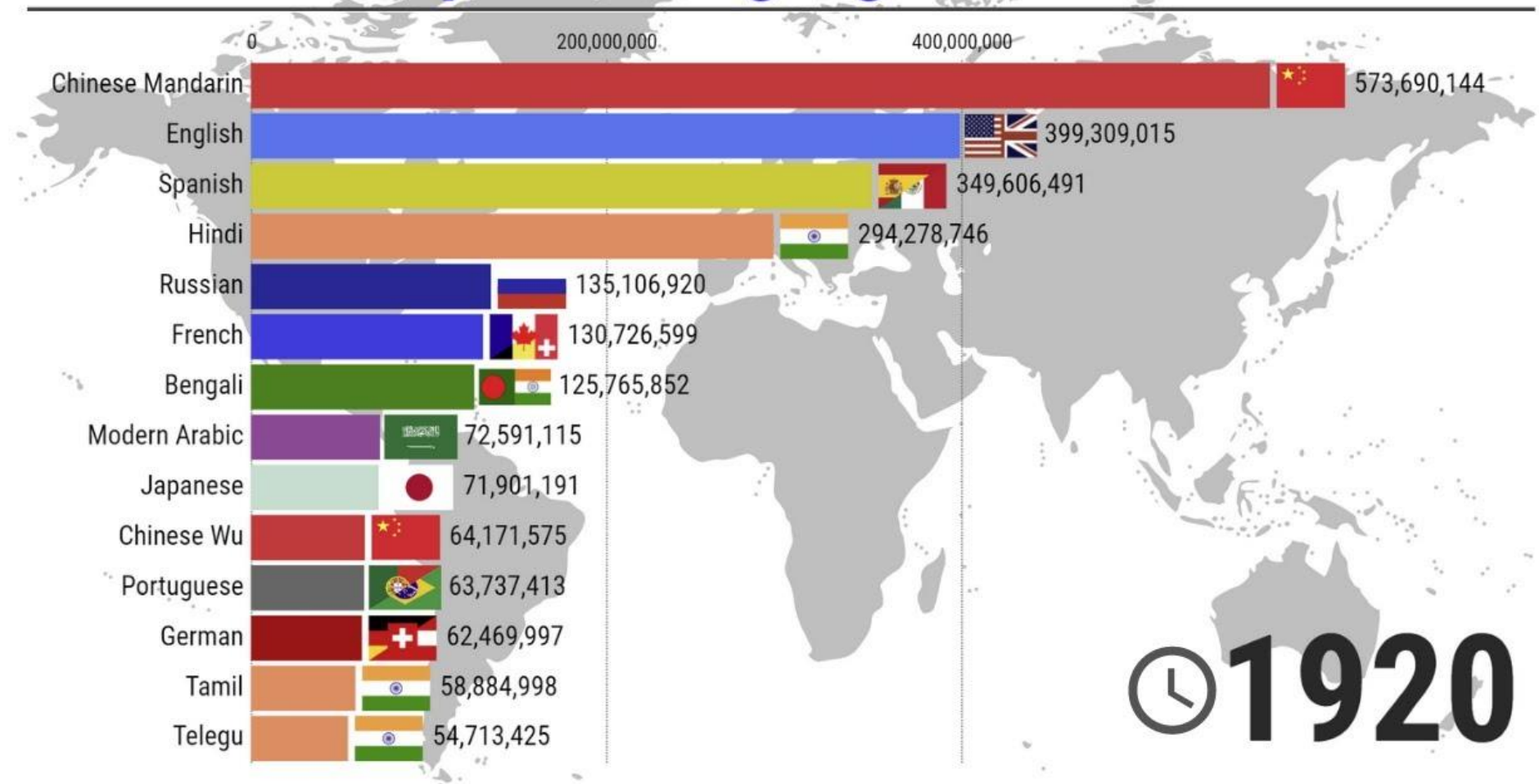
[mj@mathiasjenny.ch](mailto:mj@mathiasjenny.ch)

## Languages of the world - over 7000 total



## Languages of the world - most spoken

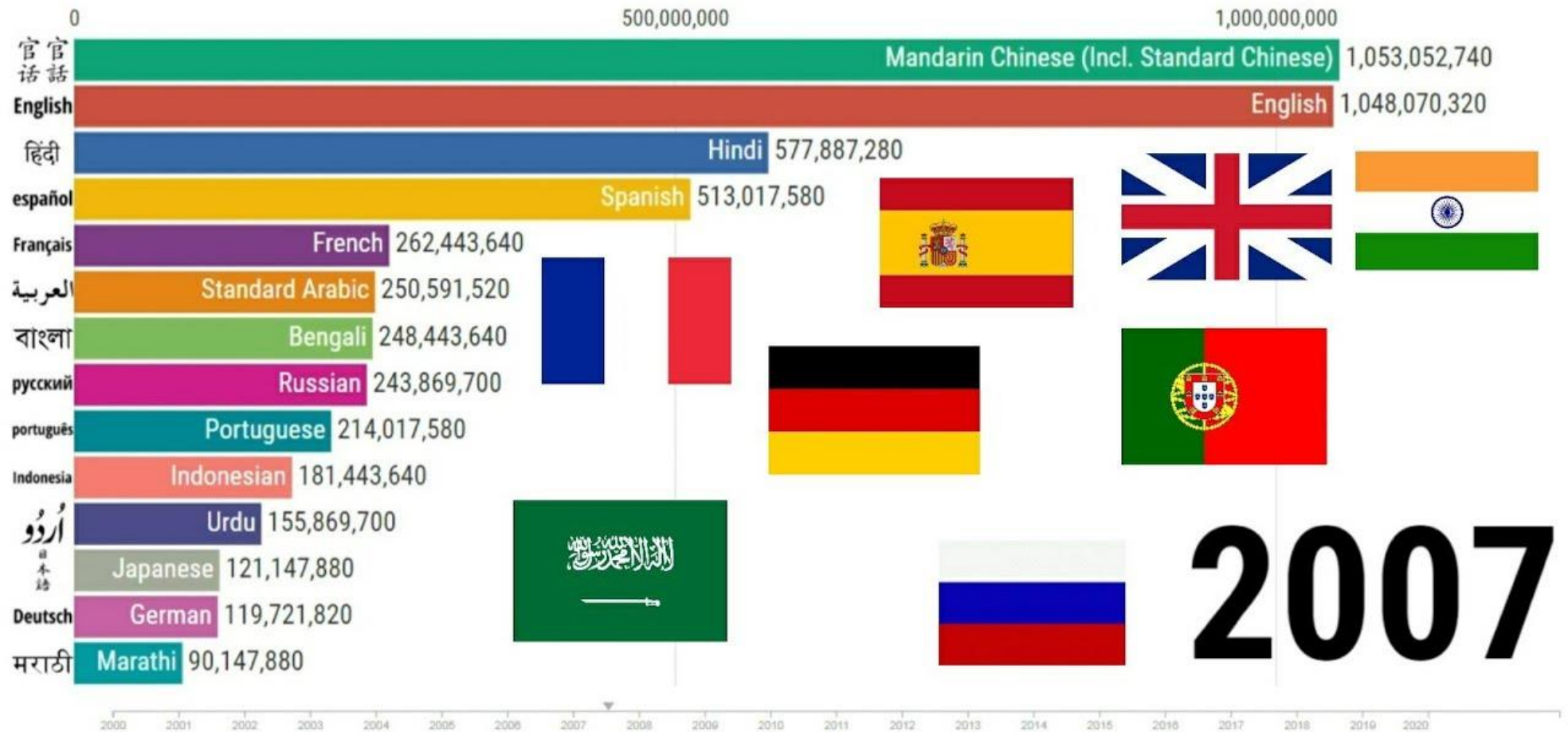
### Most Spoken Languages in the World



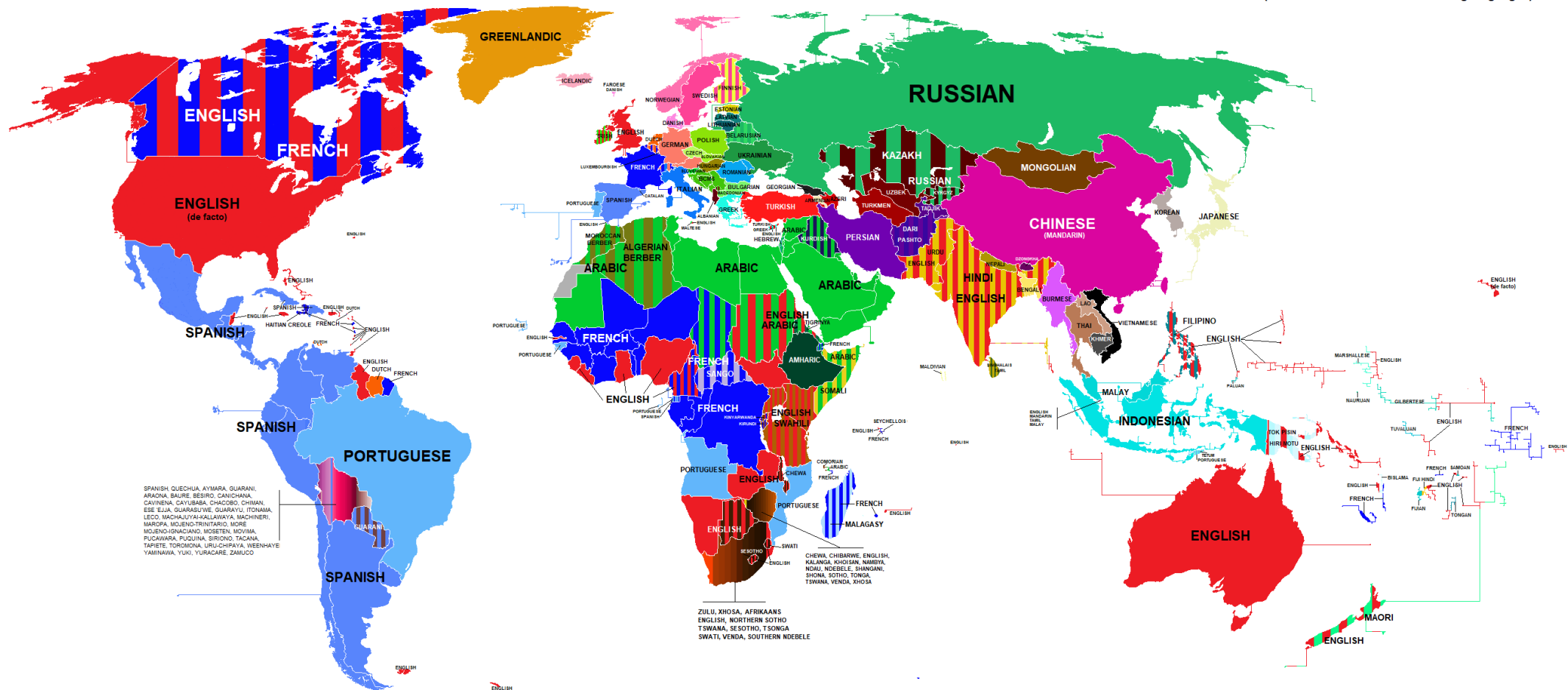


## Most spoken languages in the world

{ 2000 - 2020 }

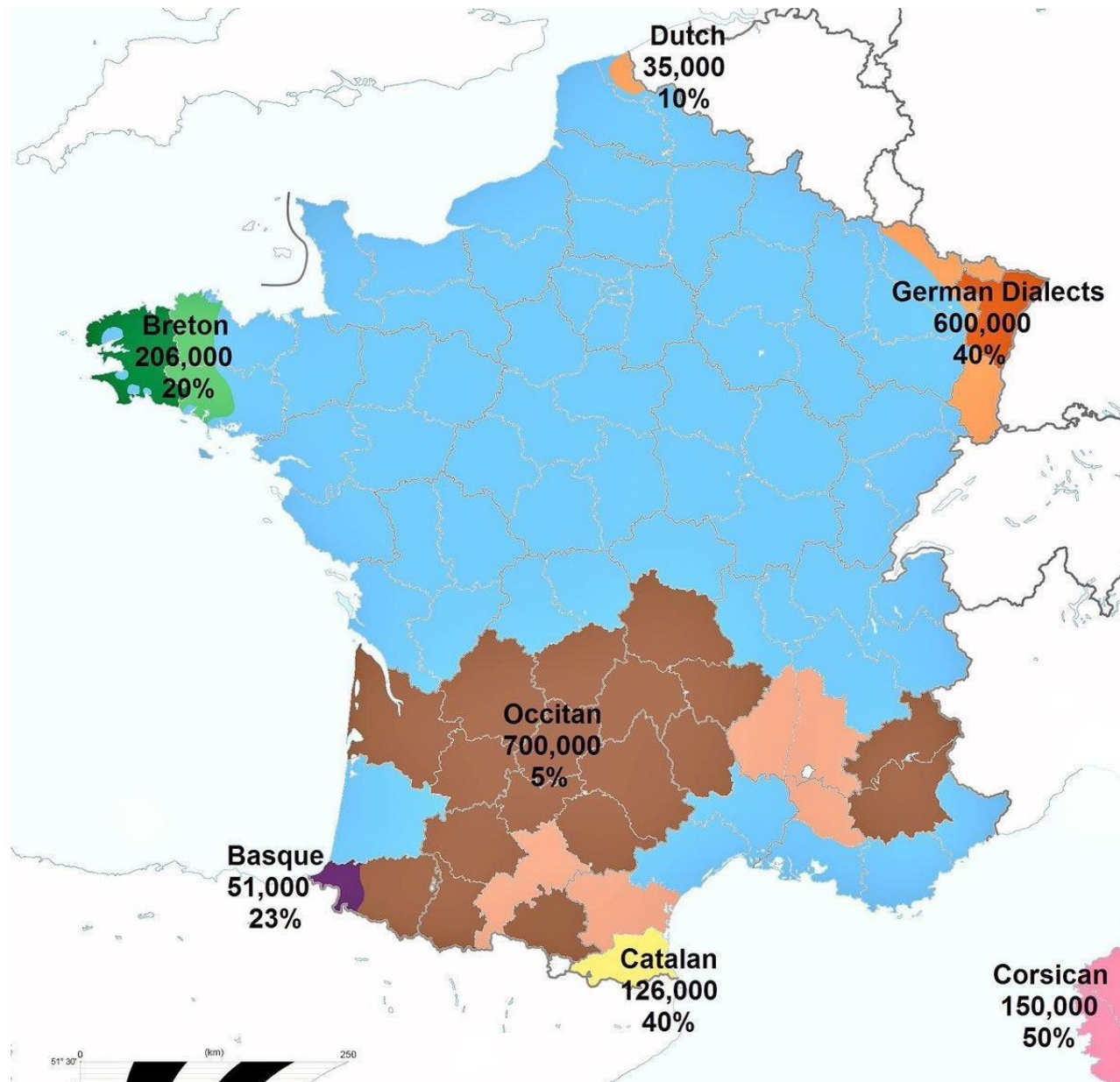


(from the Constitution or as working languages)





## Minority languages - for example France



**The languages of France belong to three sub-groups of the Indo-European language family, and one non-Indo-European language:**

**Romance (originating in Latin):**

French, Occitan, Catalan, Corsican

**Germanic:**

German, Dutch

**Celtic:**

Breton

**Non-Indo-European (isolate):**

Basque

French is the only language used in education and administration, and it is predominant in the media. Most people use French in most or all communication contexts.

**Catalan** is also spoken across the border in Andorra (national language) and Spain. It is very vital, especially in Spain and Andorra.

**Occitan**, closely related to Catalan, is spoken to some extent, but mostly by elderly people and as cultural asset. Revival efforts are not very successful, it seems.

The **Provençal** language (closely related to Occitan) has completely disappeared from the southern coasts of France and survives only in the rich literature going back to the Middle Ages.

**Corsican** is more closely related to Sardinian and Italian than to French. Quite vital as symbol of Corsican identity.

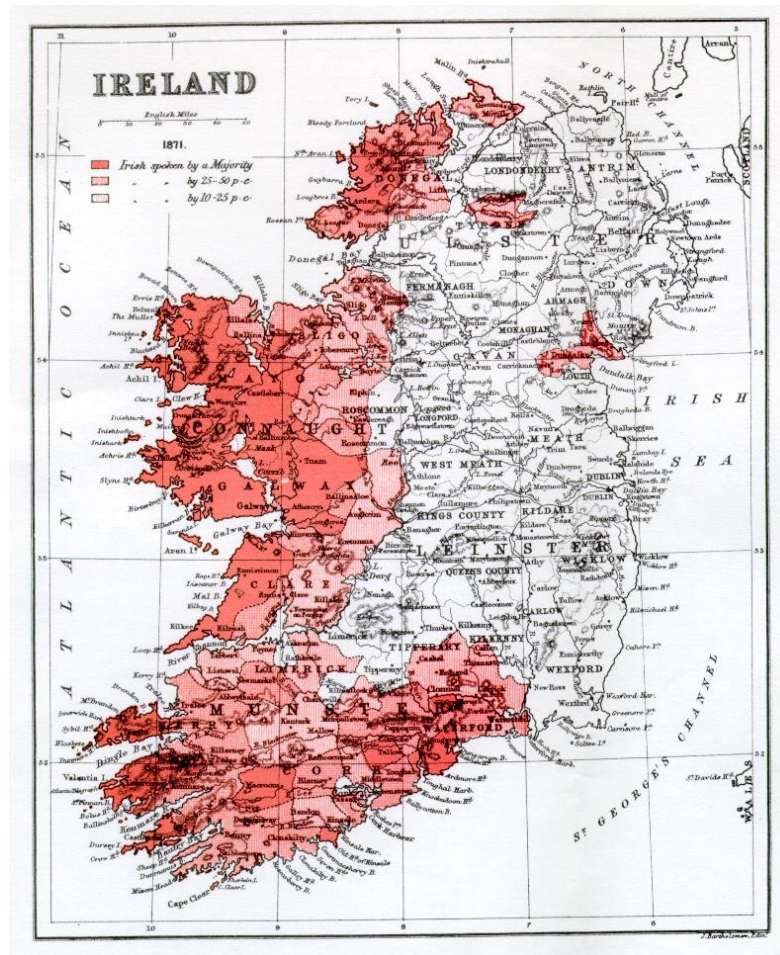
**Breton** is related to Irish, Welsh, and Scottish Gaelic in the UK. Not very vital, seen as cultural identity, but not much used in everyday life.

**Basque** is the remnant of a very old European population before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans. In Spain it is more vital than in France,

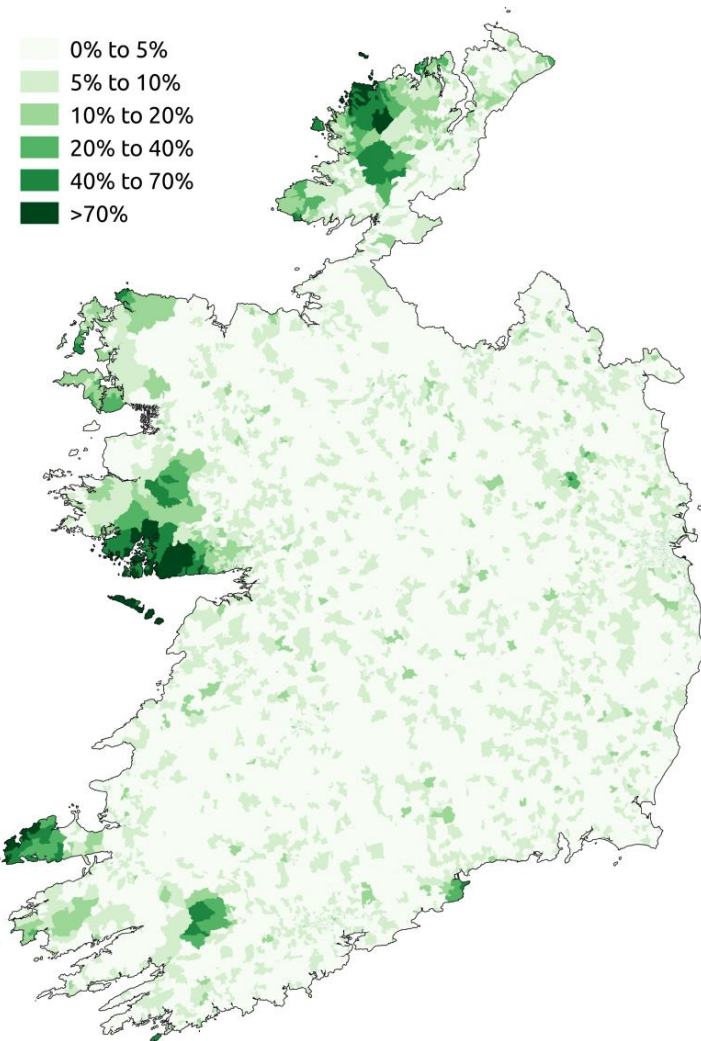


But - official status does not ensure the strength of a language!

Example: Republic of Ireland



1871



2011

## Literary languages - more stable over time

Writing and reading were available only to few people until a few centuries ago in Europe, and until about 100 years ago in most other parts of the world.

Writing a language can conserve it and make its use stronger in a community.

Many languages are known to us only because they have been written. The spoken forms have long disappeared:

Sumerian	5500 years ago	- disappeared without traces
Egyptian	5000 years ago	- disappeared as spoken language
Classical Greek	3500 years ago	- lives on as modern Greek
Etruscan (Italy)	2700 years ago	- disappeared without traces
Latin	2700 years ago	- lives on as Romance languages

## Newly written languages

- we cannot say much about lost unwritten languages

Most of the world's languages are not written or have been written only very recently.

For many languages, writing was introduced in the last 200 years, mostly by missionaries spreading Christianity to remote places. The Latin (Roman) alphabet was used in most cases.

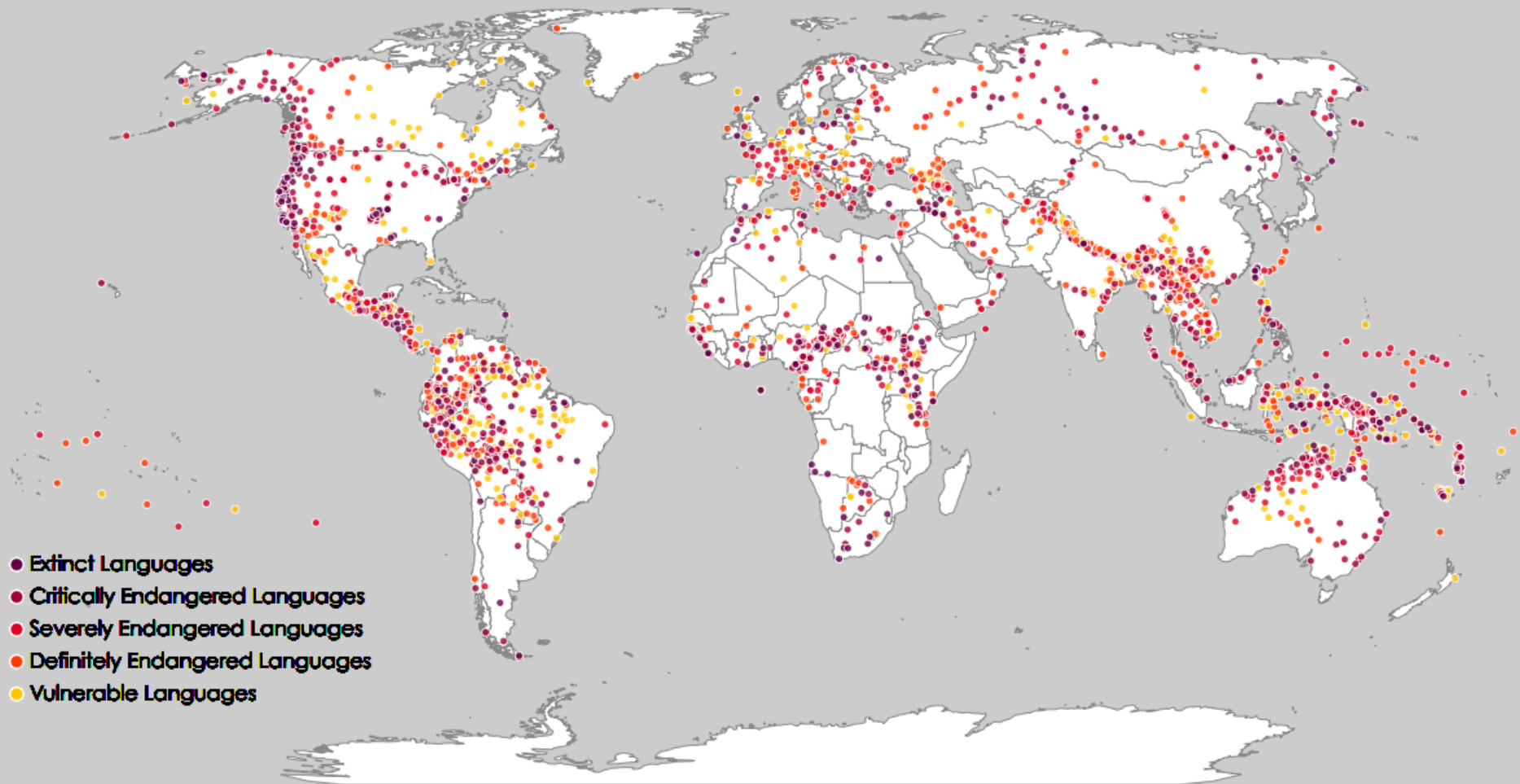
With high printing costs, writing and publication in small languages mostly remained impossible.

Online media have dramatically cut costs and led to a democratization of writing. This can be an important step towards giving non-national languages more weight. For example, Wikipedia is available in many non-national languages.

# Language change, language shift, and language death

## Extinct & Endangered Languages Around the World

Group members: Ming Cheng, Yue Xu, Chawisara Uswachoke



# Causes of language change

## Internal

- Laziness of speakers → sound change
- Frequency of use → shortening of forms
- Leveling of irregularities → simplification of grammar

## External

- Language contact
- Social pressure (e.g. taboo avoidance)

**Language change can happen faster if there are fewer stabilizing factors such as feedback from other speakers and a standardized written variety.**

## Language change is not the same as language loss

As languages change all the time, they can diversify into several languages. This does not mean that the original language disappeared or was lost, but rather that it developed into new languages.

This is what happened to **Latin**, which was spoken in Rome and the Roman Empire 2000 years ago. Latin developed different dialects in different parts of the vast empire. These dialects at some point became written standard languages of their regions and are today known as French, Spanish, Italian, etc.

Other languages disappeared because their speakers shifted to some other language. This happened for example to **Egyptian**, which was written in **Hieroglyphs** and spoken in present-day Egypt. The latest form of Egyptian, **Coptic**, ceased to be used as a spoken language in the 19th century and was replaced by Egyptian Arabic.



## Why do languages disappear?

A language may disappear due to a number of factors.

Most important are **social**, **political**, and **religious** factors:

People may not see the importance of their native language

- increased use of a more dominant language
- interrupted transmission to children

Loss of use of the language in the society

- restriction of the language to some domains (village, farming, ...)
- loss of expressions for everyday situations in other domains
- decreased functionality of the language
- further decrease of use leading to less exposure
- vicious circle of decreasing exposure and faster change

Many people still believe that it is better for their children to learn only the dominant national language. If a second language is added, English is deemed to be more important.

Advantages in education and economic development are deemed more important than cultural conservation

This eventually leads to a complete shift away from smaller languages to bigger languages of broader communication.

The smaller language may be completely given up or retained only in some traces (songs, poems, some special vocabulary).

The dominant language takes over in all domains, replacing the original language or languages of the community.

The result is often the use of the national language with some traces of the original native language:

- regional pronunciation (“accent”)
- some grammatical features
- some ways of speaking (pragmatics)
- some retained vocabulary (typically kinship terms)

The shift of original regional languages to the national language can therefore lead to **new dialects** in the national language and eventually to new languages (DIVERSIFICATION).

This happened in Latin, which replaced languages spoken in the area of the Roman Empire before the Roman conquest. It can also be seen in the **different varieties of English** (for example Indian English vs British English).

→ **There will very likely never be only one language spoken in the world!**

## **Why is language loss a problem?**

If a language disappears, much more is lost than just the language:

- Part of the identity of the community
- Cultural knowledge of the community
- Literary traditions of the community
- Indigenous knowledge (medicine, food, etc.)

**With each language that disappears, the world loses a part of its general traditional knowledge and cultural heritage.**

## What can be done?

- State support in education, media, printing
- Documentation of languages and cultures
- Education programs for communities using smaller languages
- Promoting the prestige of smaller languages in their communities

The most important factor helping smaller languages to survive is the attitude of the communities themselves, as well as the majority language speakers of a country.

➤ **All languages should be seen as important cultural assets of the whole country, not as a threat to “national unity”.**

**In the next lesson, we will have a closer look at non-Burmese languages of Myanmar.**