

Certification course for Myanmar Language Studies:

“Language and society in Myanmar and beyond”

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

Lesson 4: The role of language in society - general

PD Dr. Mathias Jenny, University of Zurich, Switzerland

www.mathiasjenny.ch

mj@mathiasjenny.ch

Keywords

Identity

Community

Society

Nationality

“Race”

Idiolect

Sociolect

Dialect

Standard language

Language and culture

Language and identity - let's start with an example

Identity - “Where are you from?”





How is language connected to identity?

When meeting people from the same community, I would speak my original dialect.

→ local dialect as shared language of a small area

When meeting people from other regions, I would speak a more neutral dialect.

→ regional/national variety as shared language of larger area

When meeting people from other countries, I would speak German or English (or some other shared language).

→ international language (“lingua franca”)

Some facts about language and identity

Language can be a means to express one's identity and belonging to a group.

Language and identity are not innate, they are acquired by children from their surroundings.

Language is maybe the most important part of culture, but this does not mean that children acquire only one language fully.

Language and identity are not fixed, they may change depending on the context.

Language and identity change throughout a person's lifetime.

A person can have many identities at different levels

You may be a different 'self' at different times or in different contexts

son/daughter

mother/father

teacher/student

friend, lover, enemy, customer, ...

These identities may be expressed by the use of different languages or variants of the same language:

- idiolects - variety spoken by an individual person
- sociolects - variety spoken by a group of people
- dialects - variety spoken in a region

Similarly, a society can use different languages or varieties in different contexts.

Nation states usually have one or more **standardized national language** which is used in official contexts (education, administration, writing).

Besides the standardized language, people may (or usually will) use **vernacular varieties** in everyday communication.

In special contexts, specific **jargons** may be in use, for example special language forms in specific professional contexts (this concerns mostly the vocabulary).

Standard French - fixed by the “Académie Française”

Efforts to avoid foreign loanwords in the French language

<i>ordinateur</i>	‘computer’
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<i>télécharger</i>	‘download/upload’
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<i>bureau</i>	‘desktop’
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<i>clavier</i>	‘keyboard’
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<i>courriel</i>	‘email’
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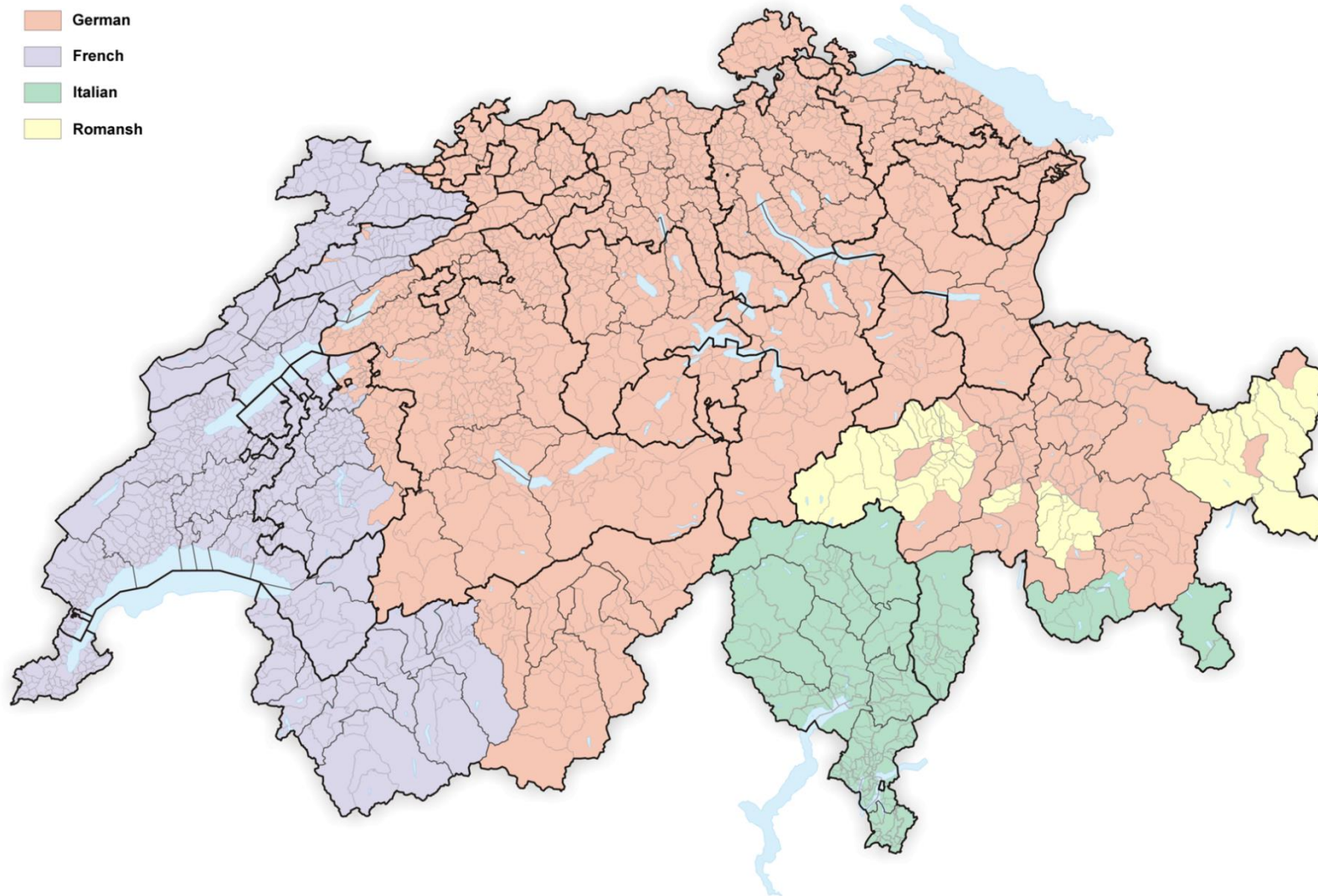
<i>mis à jour</i>	‘update’
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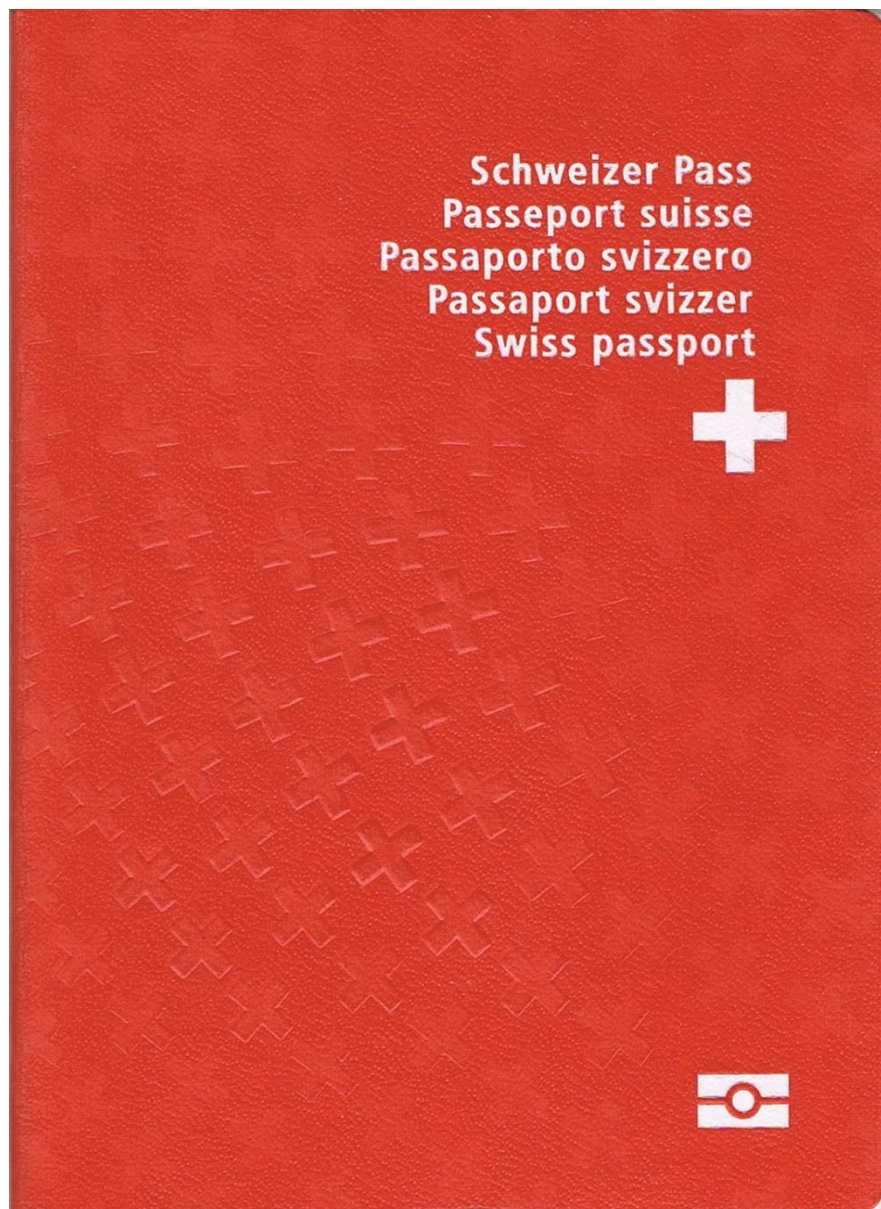
Written standard language - is it necessary?

A fixed standard spelling of a language is useful for written communication

- it can get over dialectal or regional differences
- it helps to make the language more unified and stable over time
- it makes reading and writing easier
 - when we read, we don't read single letters, but whole words
 - if the words we read look different from what we are used to, reading is more difficult and slower
 - it's easier to remember a fixed than to think how to write a word
- colloquial (non-standard) spellings are ok in informal chats, especially among people who share the same background

Official languages of Switzerland - no countrywide official language





Similar in India

but Hindi and English
are official in all States



Road sign in Delhi in

- Hindi
- English
- Punjabi
- Urdu



Back to the beginnings ... how children learn language

A child is born without a language, but with the ability to learn (“acquire”) the language their environment.

Language acquisition in a natural context happens together with social and cultural experience. The child sees, smells, hears, feels different things in their surroundings and learns to link these experiences to verbal expressions.

Frequent experiences in the child’s early life make them familiar with these experiences and words used to express them.

Language in this way becomes a means to express experiences in the immediate surroundings of the individual child.

Not all children have the same environments

- children are exposed to different experiences
- children acquire different languages even in the same society

These differences are later partly neutralized when the children have contact with larger groups.

With broader circles of interaction, children learn more and more how to adapt to new environments and accommodate to the language use of other people.

The more similar the experiences children are exposed to, the more similar their language will be.

→ **shared background is important in communication**

If there is much shared background, many things can remain unexpressed, and the people still understand each other.

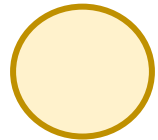
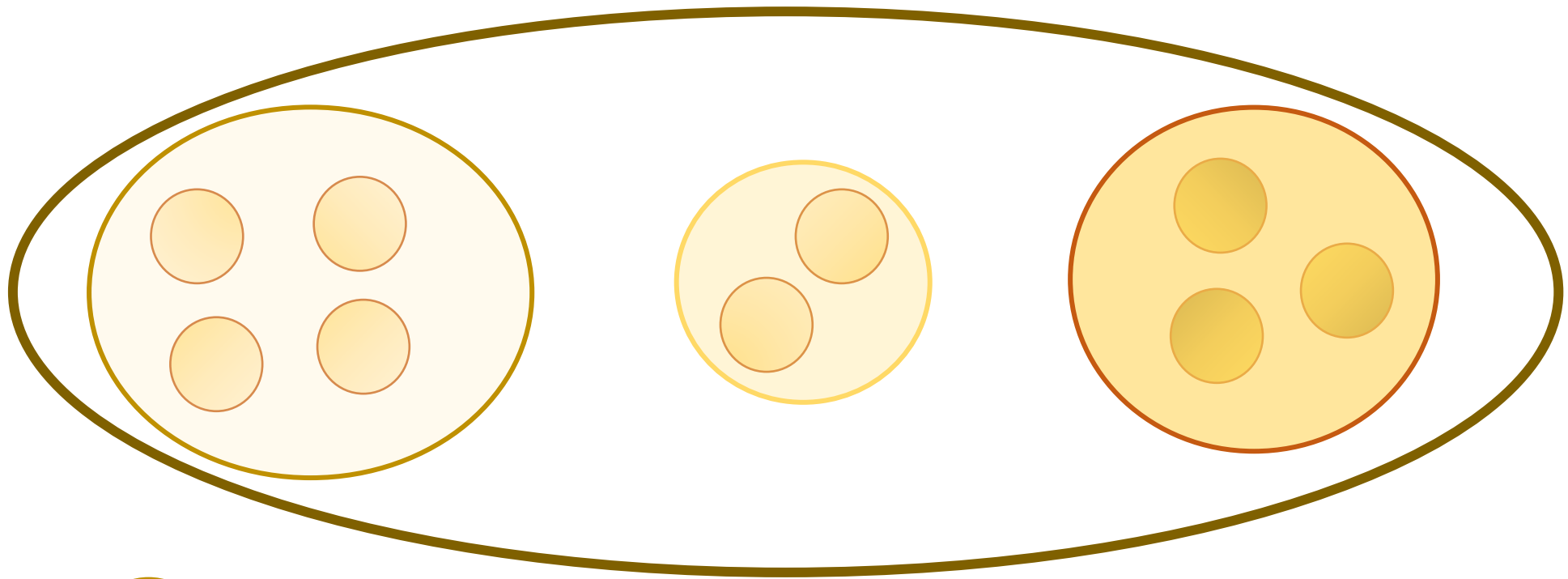
(Remember that most things we mean are not said!)

This also works the other way round:

The use of a specific language form can suggest shared background.

This can be used to define groups in a society or speech situation.

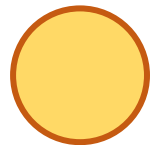
The specific language form used to indicate groups are usually not different languages or varieties (though they may be), but the specific use (or non-use) of expressions that only **in-group persons** understand in the context.



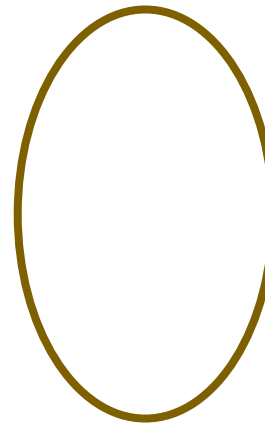
Family 1: farmers



Family 2: shop owners



Family 3: office workers



English speaking village

Family 1 will have their own conventions of speaking, using vocabulary related to farming.

When speaking to Family 2 or Family 3, some of the farming vocabulary must be explained, and Family 2 and Family 3 will not understand all things Family 1 talk about (lack of shared knowledge of family-internal matters).

Family 1 can stick to their own expressions to show that they are a group different from Family 2 and Family 3.

- Each family (and individual) encode their specific culture in their language.
- If they change their profession, the language will still conserve the culture.
- If they change both profession and language, a part of the culture is lost.

Language as cultural depository of a society

Languages encode cultural knowledge in their lexicon, e.g. names of plants, animals, tools, food, etc. (but also literature, songs, poetry, etc.)

If people don't learn the full lexicon of their language, they lose a part of the cultural knowledge of their society.

The loss of linguistic knowledge and cultural knowledge can lead to the loss of important practical skills (e.g. food preparation, medicine, production of tools, ...).

- Every language is an important pool of knowledge that is lost when a language is lost.

Languages can also encode social structures:

Two forms of the pronoun 'you' in German (and other European languages)

- ***du*** is used within families, with friends, and when speaking to children.
- ***Sie*** is used when speaking to adults who are not family or (close) friends.

→ This distinction is lost when translating German into English.

Summary:

- Language is used to express the identity of the speaker.
- Language is used to define and indicate groups of speakers.
- Language is used to encode the culture of the speaker and their group.
- Language is used to transmit and preserve the knowledge and culture of a speaker and their group.

Point for reflection:

Many western languages/societies are very careful these days to always use both masculine and feminine forms of words (“ladies and gentlemen”, not only “sirs”). Why?

In the next lesson, we'll have a look how this works in the societies of Myanmar.