

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 12: Conclusions and outlook

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Beyond Prescriptive and Descriptive Linguistics:

Applied Linguistics -

Applying linguistic theory and knowledge to everyday tasks

1. Language use - convention and habit

Language is a cultural **convention** that is used all the time by the speakers.

Language only exists by being used, especially in interaction with other speakers of the same language.

By frequent use, language becomes a strong **habit** that is reinforced and adjusted in interaction with other speakers. This leads to a leveling of the language used in a community.

Children learn the language of their community naturally by listening, remembering, trying out, and adjusting (**feedback from other speakers**).

When teaching a foreign language, we can use these facts about language to make teaching natural and successful.

For example, imagine you are teaching English to a non-English speaker.

Your student uses an expression like “I want eat spicy curry.”

What can you do to correct their wrong grammar?

1. **Explain** that in English you have to say “I want to eat ...”, that you always need “to” after “want” if it is used with a verb.

2. **Repeat the sentence in the correct form** and use similar expressions frequently in the following conversation:

“Oh, you’re hungry? I also **want to** eat something now; I also **want to** drink a coffee. Then I **want to** go to the park. Do you **want to** come with me?”

2. Why is language so hard to catch even if everyone can use it?

No two individuals speak exactly the same language, nor is the language of an individual consistent over time and in different situations.

There is some overlap among phonemes in their actual phonetic realization.

The same phoneme may be pronounced differently in different contexts, but the hearer automatically perceives the “correct” form.

In Burmese နေ and နီ may both be pronounced as [ni] in some contexts.

Depending on the sentence, the hearer will “hear” the word either as /ne/ နေ or /ni/ နီ.

The brain of the hearer calculates not only the perceived acoustic signal, but also the grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic context, as well as the overall pronunciation characteristics of the speaker.

Language use involves more than putting together **words** (“lexicon”) according to grammatical **rules** (“morphology” and “syntax”).

The semantics assigned to any word (“lexeme”) varies from one speaker to the next, based on their individual history.

Speakers never express everything they mean overtly

→ room for individual and situational interpretation.

Speakers often don’t mean what they say (“pragmatics”).

→ **Language analysis and processing is not straightforward**

Implications for language technology?

3. Multilingualism and multiculturalism

Language is an important cultural convention and encodes the community's cultural traditions and habits.

Language use shapes our habits of thinking and therefore our worldviews.

An individual or community can use more than one language, and at the same time can be part of more than one cultural tradition.

Multilingualism is the norm, rather than the exception around the world.

Participating in more than one cultural tradition does not decrease the identity of the individual or society, but rather makes it richer (→ broader worldview).

Societies as well as individuals should be careful not to lose any part of their cultural inheritance, including languages.

All cultures/languages used by a society or individual make up their identity.

4. Historical linguistics and orthography

Modern orthography can conserve older forms

If the language has a long literary tradition, the orthography is likely to lag behind the changes that occur in the spoken language.

Conservative orthography can be useful in seeing connections between words that are obscure in the spoken language.

Conservative orthography can retain the link to old literature.

On the other hand, conservative orthography can be difficult and time consuming to learn, as the link between spelling and pronunciation may not be obvious.

Reformed orthography is easier to learn, but may be more ambiguous

Reformed spelling can make the link between written and spoken language more obvious - it is easier to learn, both for reading and writing.

→ Burmese could respell ထုတ် ထုပ် and ကံ ကန် as ထုတ် and ကန် (or ထအ် and ကဉ်).

The writing system may reduce the number of letters needed.

→ Burmese could do without ဃ ဈ ဘ ဓ ရ ဌ ဍ ဎ ဏ.

What about voicing? အိန်ဇောန့် ထမင်းဂျက် ဒဂယ် ...

ငါပျေးတာမယုန်ဖူးဆိုယင် ငါလယ်းထတ်မပျေးတော့ဖူး။

ငါပျေးဒါမယုန်ဗူးစိုယင် ငါလယ်းထတ်မပျေးဒေါ့ဗူး။

ငါ ပျေးဒါ မယိုဉ်ဗူး စိုယိုဉ် ငါလယ်း ထအ် မပျေးဒေါ့ဗူး။

What would be the consequences for Burmese?

→ **Note: Writing reform is not the same as orthographic anarchism!**

5. Language change and conserving language – language planning

Languages change all the time due to internal and external factors.

Language change is normal in all naturally spoken languages.

Prescriptive linguistics can be used to set a standard variety of a language that is to be used in official and formal contexts, but the spoken variety cannot be influenced by rules and regulations other than communicative factors.

→ **Language by its very nature is inherently democratic!**

Language planning may be effective to some extent by encouraging the usage of certain varieties and languages. Language planning must be done in education (at an early stage) as well as through information to the general public, including mass media.

(How) can languages be saved from changing or disappearing?

6. Minority languages in the online media - opportunities and challenges

Writing formerly unwritten languages - important points

What variety of the language should be used?

What script should be used?

Who will want to use the script?

On what platform will it be used?

Factors to be considered:

Prestige groups, widely accepted language variety

Cultural and religious traditions of the community

Adequacy of the writing system to the purposes of the target group

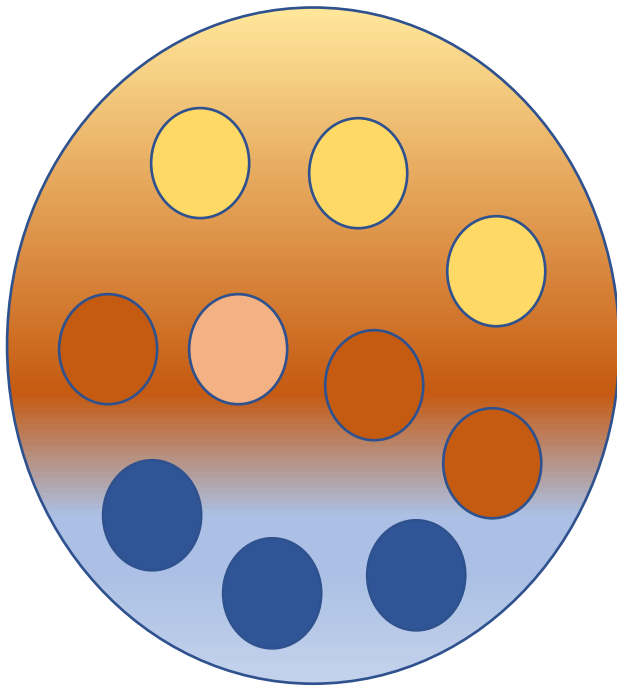
Technological constraints (e.g. letters not available on smart phones)

Disappearance of local varieties through standardization?

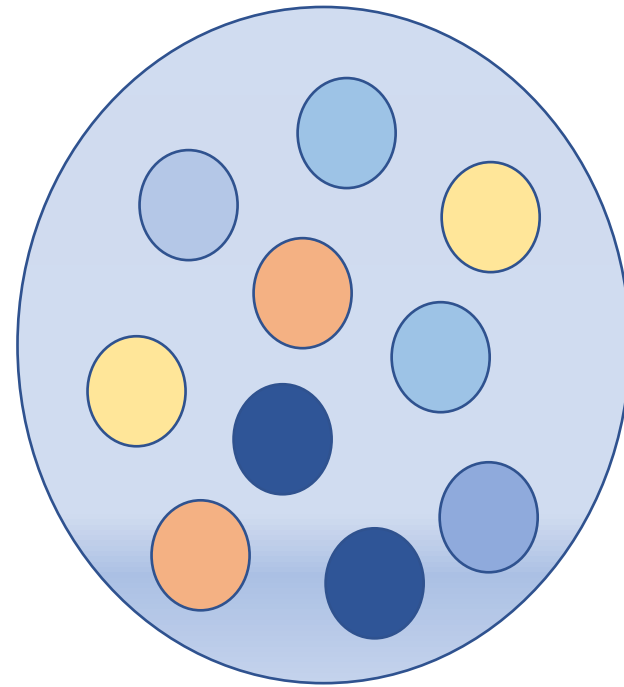
7. Linguistic federalism - a way ahead for Myanmar

Hypothetical scenario: a group of children including Mon, Karen, Burmese

Natural setting



Top-down regulation



If children (or adults) interact naturally, there is no problem with multilingualism.

Multilingualism in a nation is no problem, but several points must be considered:

- What languages are to be recognized as official languages? What local language? What variety of local language?
- At what level of administration and education should these languages be used?
- Burmese plus language of State (similar to India)?
- Burmese and local language of majority group?
- Official documents? University education? Media (TV, radio)?

No simple answer can be given to these questions.

Only a change in attitude can lead to solutions:

Multilingualism is no threat to either societies or individuals.

Multilingualism is a cultural asset of the nation

Multilingualism is good for the development of children

Many languages can be used in any society without threatening the identity or coherence of the society. There is no reason to prohibit the use of any language in any context, though it is ok to have a national lingua franca for broader use.

Being a native speaker of a language other than the national language is an advantage, rather than a disadvantage!

Being part of a multilingual society is an advantage, rather than a disadvantage!

So ... just make multilingualism natural:

- Radio stations playing songs in different languages (not only Burmese and English).
- TV stations playing documentaries and films in other languages than Burmese (and English, Korean, Chinese).
- Assign time slots or frequencies on the radio for different languages.
- Promote multilingual newspapers also in print in areas with different languages.
- Let children speak their native languages everywhere without restriction (except perhaps for lessons at school).
- Teach children songs and verses in different languages of their area.
- Rather than having centralized curricula, allow federalism also in education. Different language backgrounds may need different approaches to teaching.

Thanks everyone for joining this course!

If you have any further questions, feel free to get in touch with me:

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