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 1: Introduction

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What will we look at in this course?

- **Language and linguistics**

- **Language and society**

We will investigate features of language and languages by using linguistics tools.

Starting from general observations, we will look at Burmese and other languages of Myanmar.

The aim of the course is for participants to understand
        1. how language works and develops
        2. how language is important in society
        3. how having more than one language is a good thing in a community

Language ဆိုတာ ...

Some ᴇᴛʏᴍᴏʟᴏɢʏ (= "history or origin of a word and its meaning"):

The English word 'language' comes from Latin *lingua* 'tongue'
(the same in French *langue*, Italian *lingua*, Spanish *lengua*)

→ the **tongue** as the most important tool in producing language

Burmese *baða-zəgà* ဘာသာစကား

    from Pali *bhāsā* 'speech' and Tibeto-Burman *ka 'word, speech'

ဘာသာ *baða* has other meanings in Burmese:

    ဗုဒ္ဓ**ဘာသာ**   'Buddhism'

    သူ**ဘာသာ**သူလုပ်နေတယ်။   'He's doing it in his own way.'

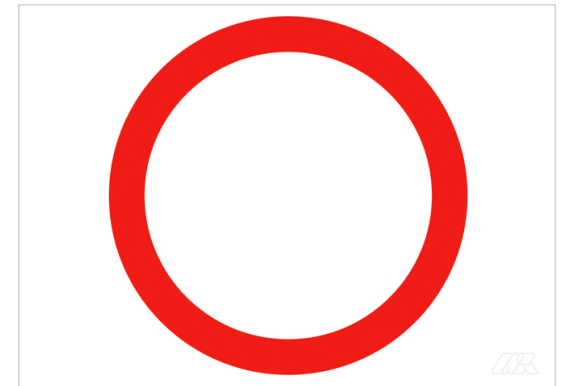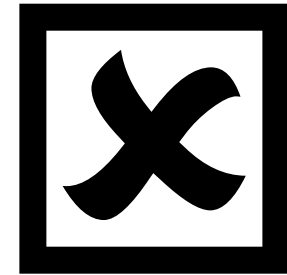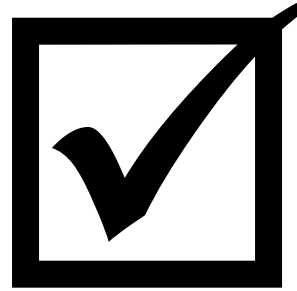→ **What does this tell us about the meaning of 'language' in Burmese culture?**

What is language?

system of signs used for (human) communication

cultural convention found in all human communities
    evolving (changing) permanently

system of **arbitrary** signs to express **concepts/ideas/thoughts**

→ there is no natural connection between a sign and its meaning

How does human language work?

The principal means of conveying meaning in language is by **combinations of sounds**.

SPEAKER: *meaning → sound* ------------> HEARER: *sound → meaning*

The speaker wants to convey an idea to the hearer
    in order to do this, he/she transforms the idea into sounds

The hearer wants to understand the message of the speaker
    in order to do this, he/she transforms the sounds into ideas

Things that make language difficult:

1. There is no natural connection between the combination of sounds and its meaning.

	English	French	Thai	Burmese
	house	*maison*	*bâːn*	*ʔeiɴ*
	tree	*arbre*	*tôn-máːj*	*ϑiʔ-piɴ*
	cat	*chat*	*mɛːw*	*cauɴ*
	bird	*oiseau*	*nók*	*hŋɛʔ*

2. Speakers never say everything they know want to convey, the hearer automatically fills in the missing parts and creates a complete idea in his mind. The more shared knowledge the speaker and hearer have, the easier the communication will be.
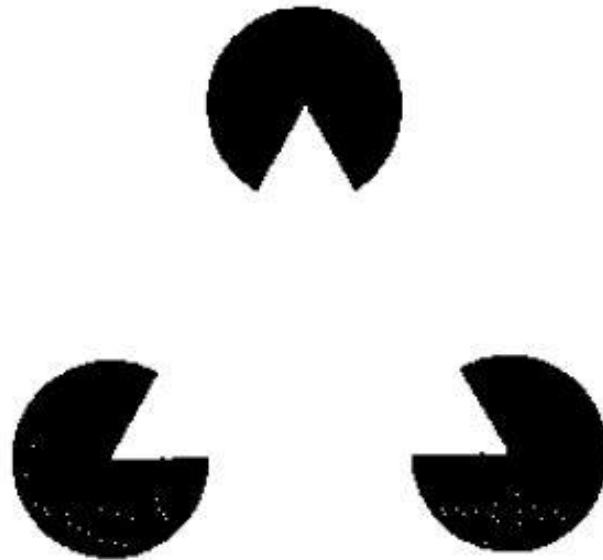
Language and thinking - concepts ("ideas") are not the same as words

The concept of 'female human' and 'male human' is there in all human societies, but not all languages have words for these:

Burmese: *mèinmá* မိန်းမ

           jauʔcà ယောက်ျား

English: *woman, girl*
           man, boy

Similar 'male sibling':   English: *brother*
                           Burmese: *ʔəko, ɲi, mauɴ* အကို၊ ညီ၊ မောင်

Why is human language special?

In spite of the mentioned difficulties, we can understand each other

Language can combine signs to achieve new complex meanings

Language can be used to talk about past and future events,
    and things that didn't happen and will never happen

Language is not innate, that means it must be learned
    any child can learn any language with the same ease

Language is a very potent and strong weapon
    it can be especially dangerous for the speaker!

"Language" vs "Languages"

Language is the system of human communication that is found in all societies

Languages are different sets of signs (sound-meaning pairs) used by different societies

Language is present in all human societies

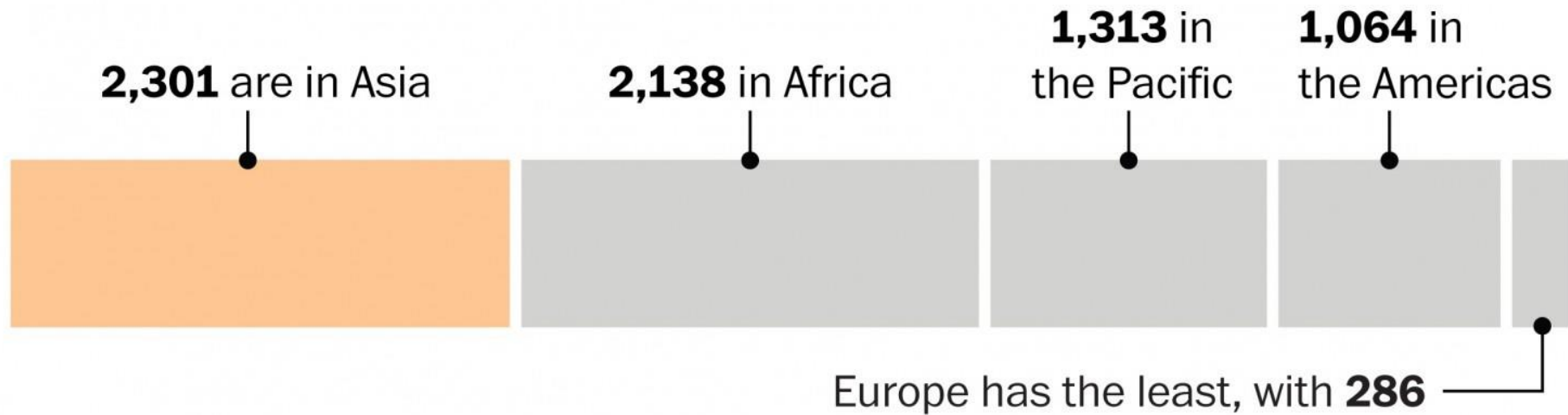Anyone can learn many **languages** at the same time

How many languages?

Question of definition - what is a language, what is a dialect

e.g.

➤ Burmese vs. Arakanese vs. Tavoyan vs. Intha

➤ American English vs. British English vs. Indian English vs. Singapore English

➤ Pwo vs. Sgaw vs. Kayah vs. Kayan vs. Pa'o

There are at least **7,102** living languages in the world.
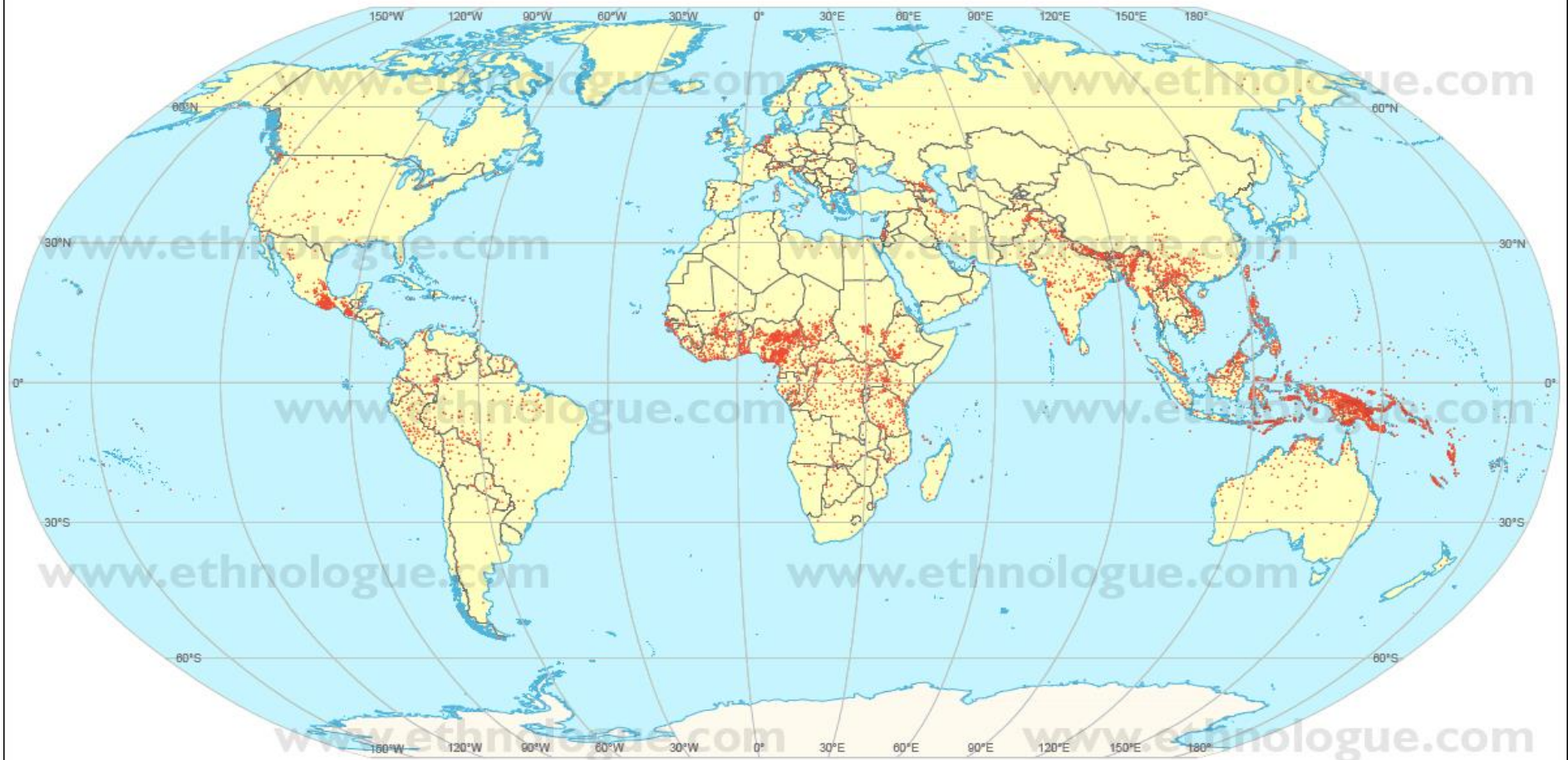
1,313 in the Pacific

1,064 in the Americas

2,301 are in Asia

2,138 in Africa

Europe has the least, with **286**

Sources: Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Eighteenth edition   THE WASHINGTON POST
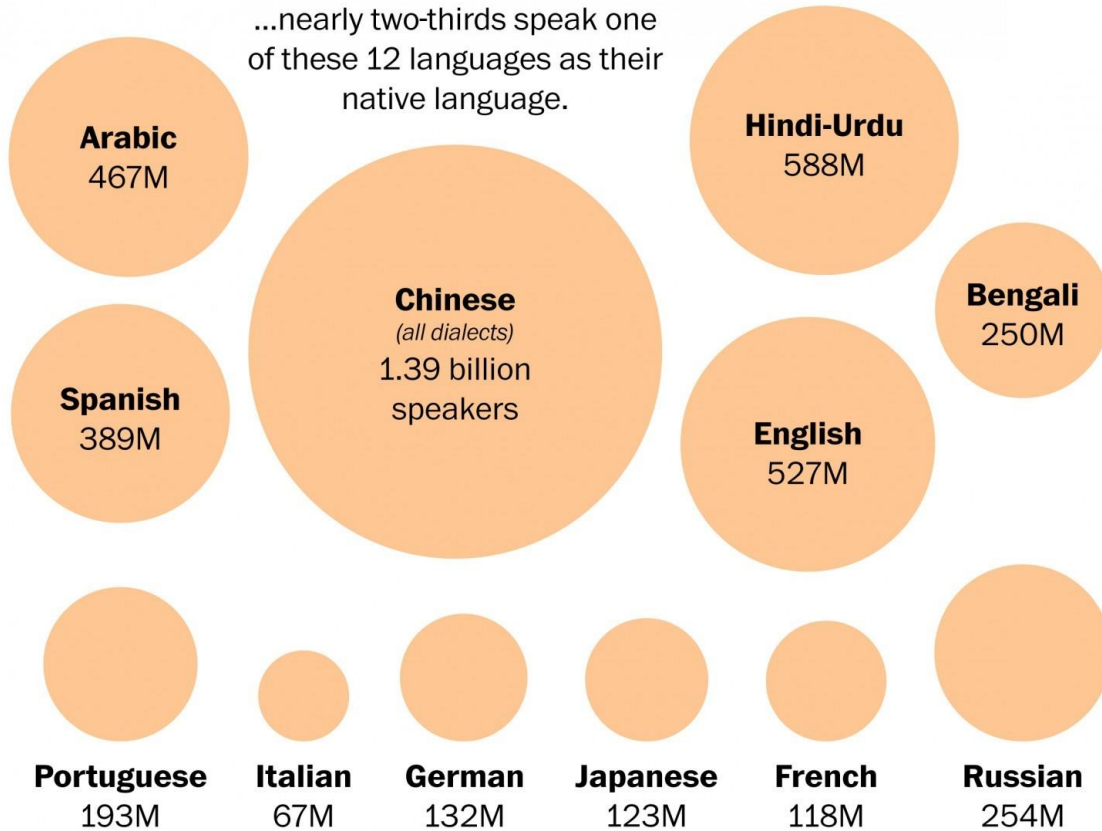
LANGUAGES OF THE WORLD

Each dot represents the geographic center of a language.

Of the **7.2 billion people** on Earth...

...nearly two-thirds speak one of these 12 languages as their native language.

Arabic
467M

Hindi-Urdu
588M

Chinese
(all dialects)
1.39 billion speakers

Bengali
250M

Spanish
389M

English
527M

Portuguese
193M

Italian
67M

German
132M

Japanese
123M

French
118M

Russian
254M

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French
82M

English is by far the most common studied foreign language in the world.

Chinese
30M

Spanish
14.5M

English
1.5 billion learners

German
14.5M

Italian
8M

Japanese
3M

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What is the aim of linguistics?

- Describing and understanding the mechanisms involved in producing and understanding language ("how can we speak and understand?")

- Understanding the mechanisms in the human brain as reflected in language structure and use ("what does language tell us about the way we think?")

- Understanding the (human) cognitive capacity ("how do humans think?")

- Understanding the functioning of communication in and across societies

- Understanding the distribution and development of languages

Descriptive and prescriptive linguistics

Descriptive linguistics
looks at how people speak, how they use their language in conversation

Prescriptive linguistics
sets the rules of good language use, tells the people how to use their language

For example:

'He ain't got nothing to eat.' instead of
'He hasn't got anything to eat.'

Descriptive approach:

Some English speakers use *ain't* for the negation of 'have, has'
Some English speakers use double negation (*ain't, nothing*)

→ Possible question: Why and where do we find this?

Prescriptive approach:

In good English, the negation of 'have, has' is *have not, has not* (*haven't, hasn't*)
Some speakers don't speak English correctly (using double negation, wrong words)

→ Possible question: How can we educate the people to use English correctly?

Both descriptive and prescriptive linguistics are important in their own fields, but we have to be careful not to confuse them!

Points for reflection:

- What is the importance of language in a community/society/country?

- What is the relevance of linguistics for understanding society structure?

Next lesson:

Basic linguistic categories - general