

a brief history of Japanese

and notes about language choice and language change

linguistic prehistory of Japan

- ◆ Long ago, Japan was a patchwork of languages and dialects.
- ◆ Most likely, the dominant families were Altaic and Austronesian.
- ◆ Here are five theories about the origin of the Japanese language:
 - (1) a language isolate, with no extant relatives (popular, but unlikely)
 - (2) an Altaic language, like Korean and Ainu (good evidence)
 - (3) an Austronesian language, as in Formosa (some evidence)
 - (4) a Dravidian language, as in southern India (silly!)
 - (5) a creole language, born in northern Kyushu (a good possibility)

kokugo appears

- ◆ By the 1500s, the primary languages of Japan were Ainu, Japanese, and Ryukyuan, each with several distinct dialects. The Shogunate maintained a network of samurai who could translate the local ways of speaking.
- ◆ Meiji imperialism began the promotion of a single “kokugo”. Immigrants learned “Japanese” as a second language; however, trade pidgins (e.g., Yokohama Pidgin) continued to flourish in the communities of foreigners who were short-term residents.

foreign language multilingualism

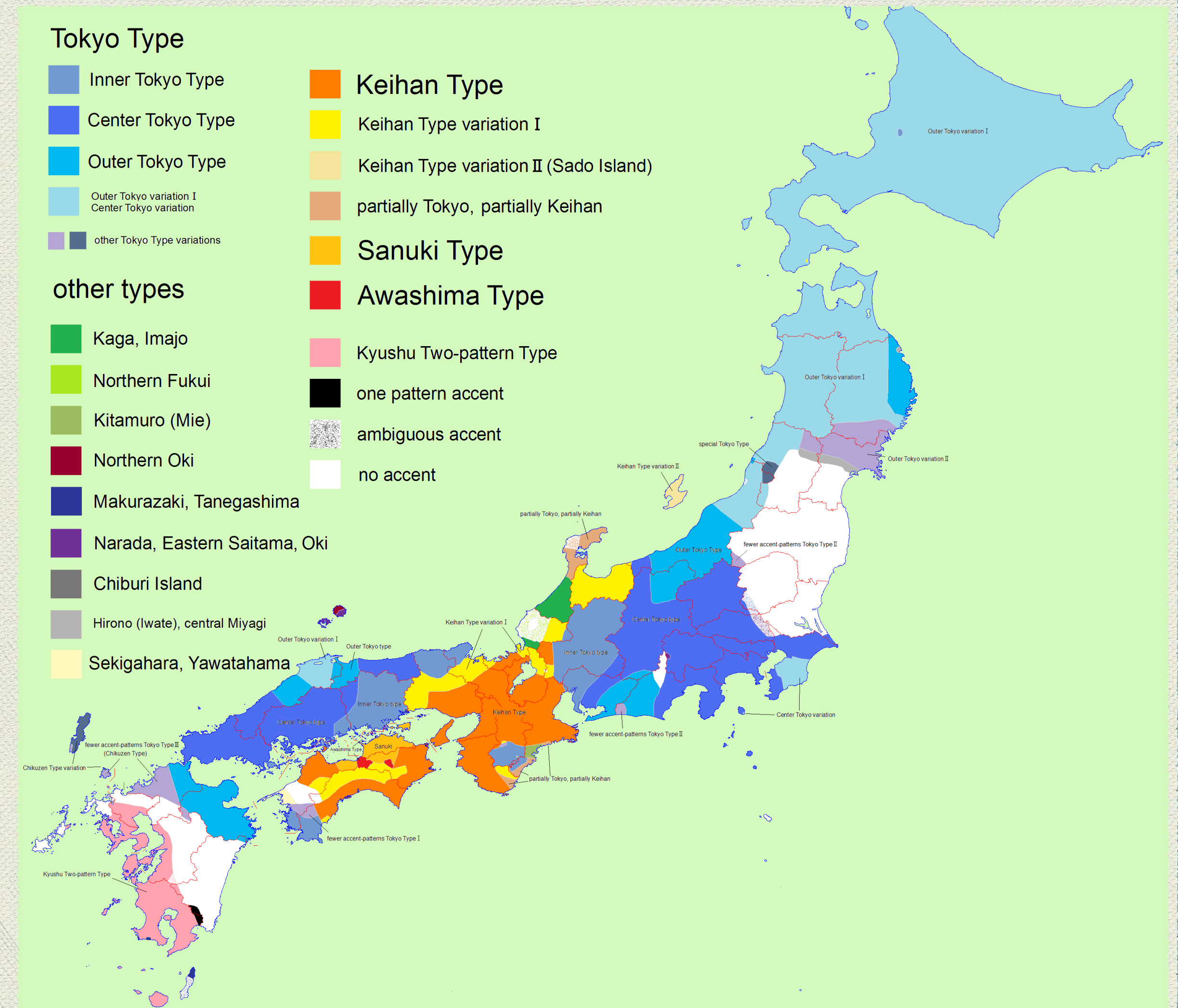
- ◆ As the Japanese nation-state began to assert itself internationally, Japanese officials and professionals learned more foreign languages.
- ◆ English, German, and French were popular among bankers and businessmen; as well as in the military.
- ◆ Chinese, Dutch, German, French, and English have all been used in medical discourse, although the particular language of preference has changed over the years.

dialect loss and national standardization

- ◆ In the Fascist era, Japanese regional speech varieties were discouraged in favor of kokugo. Although regional varieties were not completely eliminated, Japan's excellent system of universal education, and later radio, greatly homogenized the speech of people across Japan.
- ◆ The concept of kokugo 国語 which emerged over the Meiji-Taisho-Showa years was that standard Japanese was the language of Japan. Other ways of speaking were either foreign languages or “nonlanguages”.
- ◆ As a result, ethnic Chinese and Koreans who lived in Japan faced less pressure to abandon their ancestral languages than did the Ainu and the Okinawans.

kokugo differences

- ◆ Even after a century of language standardization, not all Japanese speak kokugo the same way.
- ◆ In addition to different vocabulary preferences, there are distinct differences of pronunciation.
- ◆ This map shows the different types of “pitch accents” used when speaking standard Japanese.

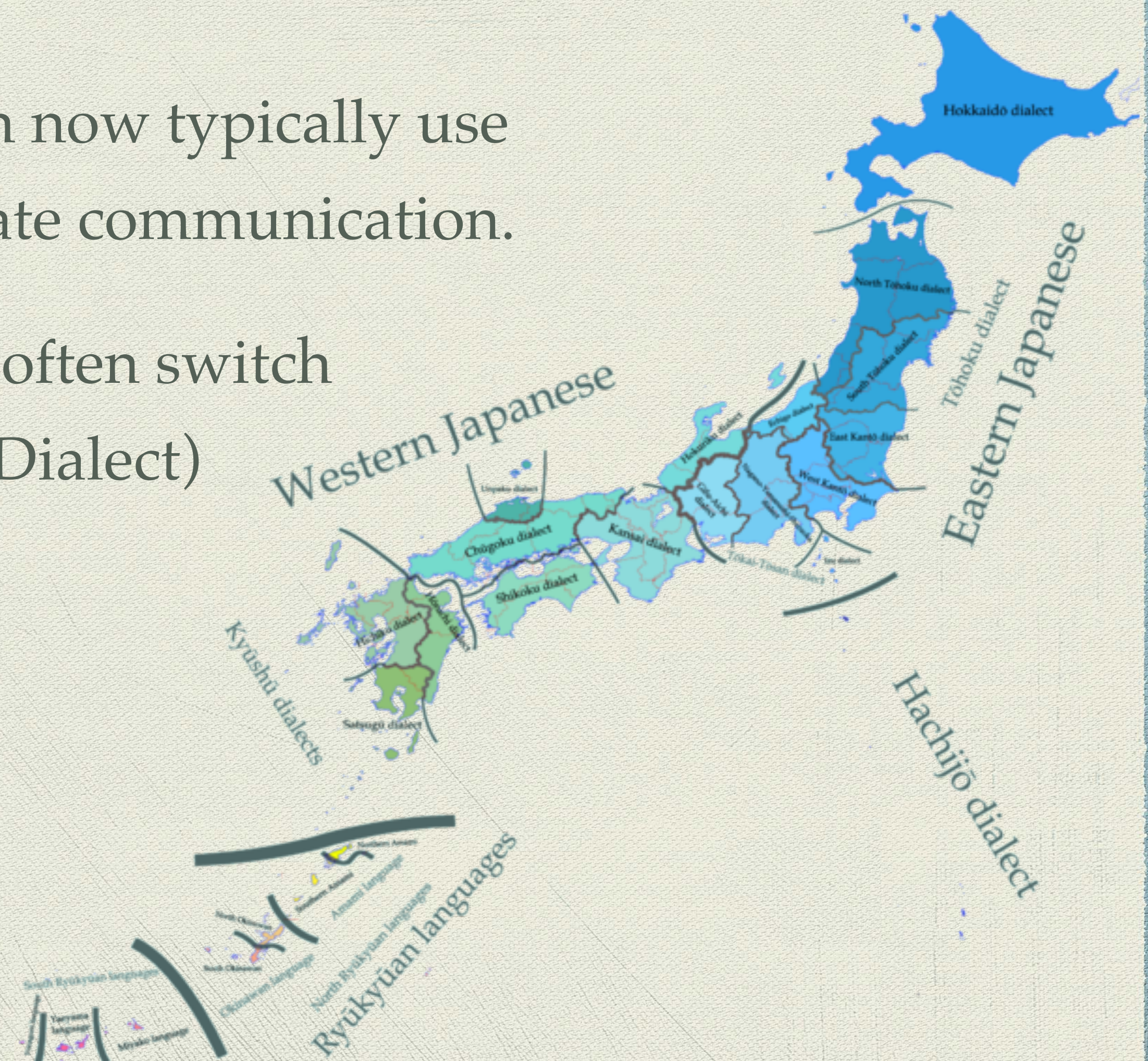


four Ps of language choice

- ◆ Multilingual people must constantly choose to use a particular language from their linguistic repertoires. There are four considerations which often guide this choice of language use.
 - (1) **Practicality:** Choose so that you can communicate and interact more easily with others.
 - (2) **Prestige:** Choose so that others will think highly of you.
 - (3) **Pride:** Choose so that you can show others your own way of speaking.
 - (4) **Punishment:** Avoid a language which is forbidden.

prestige vs. pride

- ◆ For **practical** reasons, educated people in Japan now typically use standard Japanese or English at work to facilitate communication.
- ◆ Native speakers of Zuzuben (Tohoku Dialect) often switch to standard Japanese (or even to a local Tokyo Dialect) because Zuzuben has low **prestige**.
- ◆ When traveling, even when they are in Tokyo, persons from Kansai may continue to speak Kansai-ben because they are **proud** of their Kansai heritage.



language change

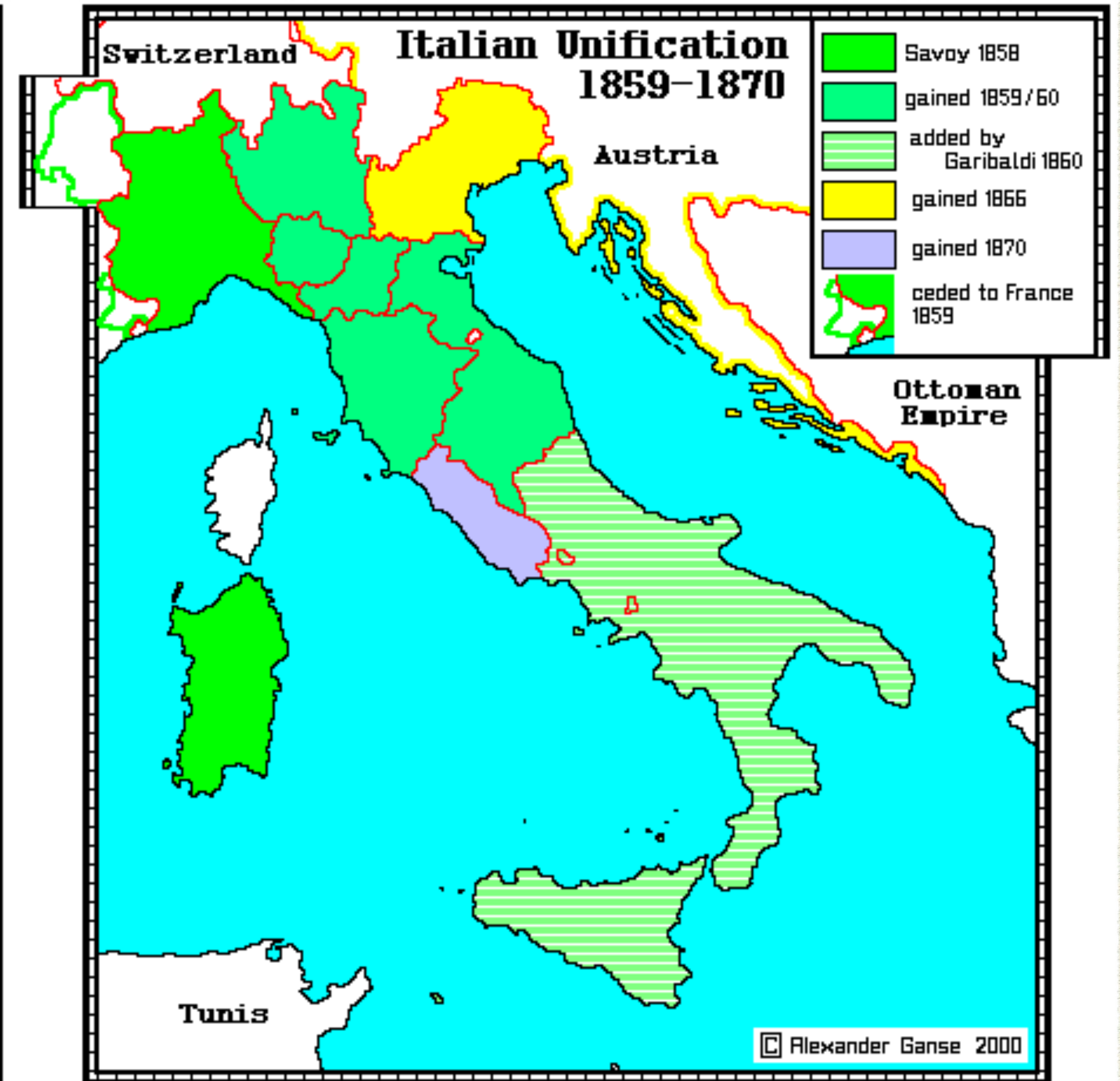
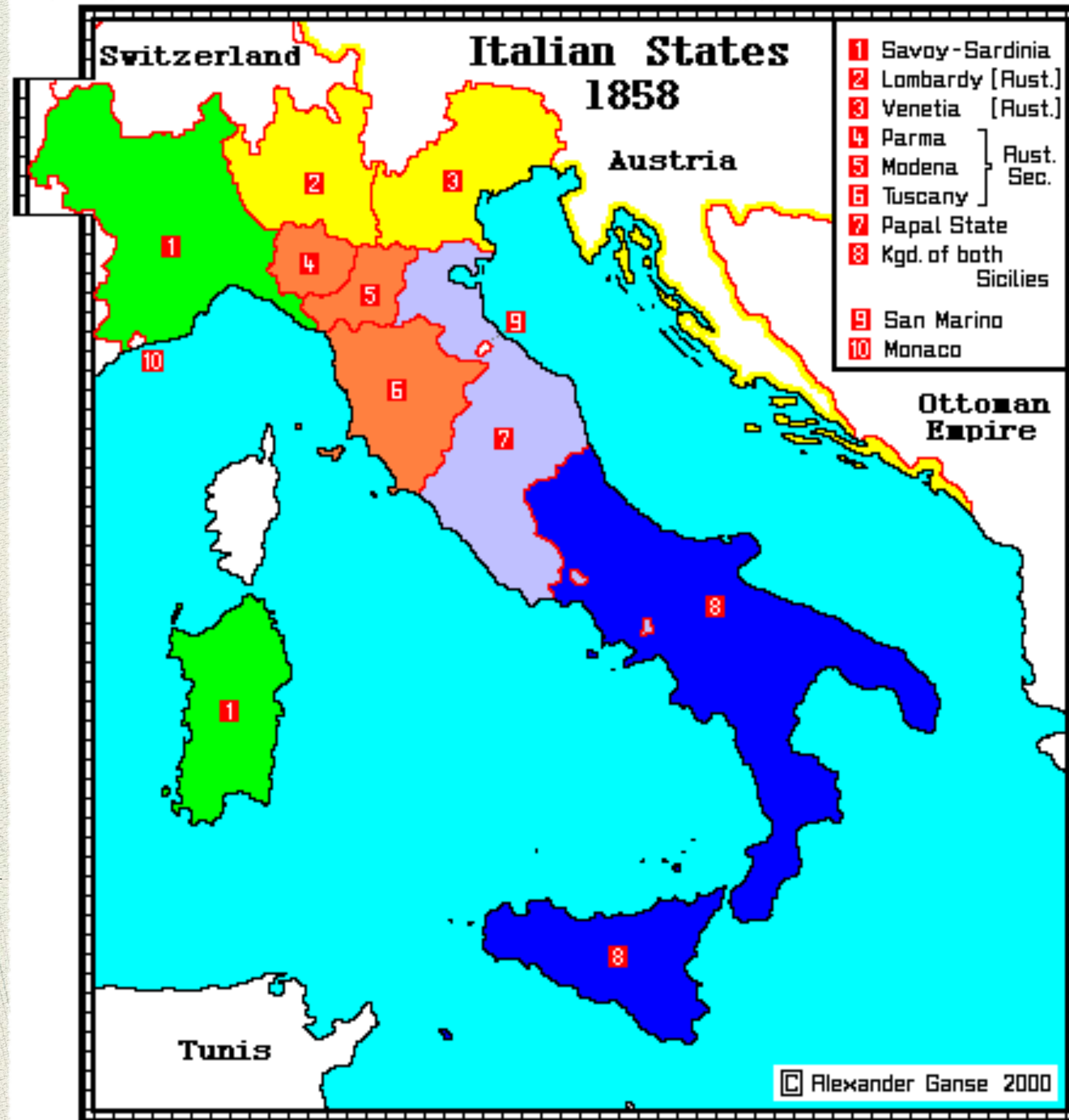
- ◆ A language does not change all at once. When a language changes, it can change in any of the following ways:
 - (1) **speaker by speaker**, with individuals adopting the change in no obvious social or stylistic pattern;
 - (2) from **group to group**, with some groups in the community adopting the change before others;
 - (3) from **style to style**, with individuals adopting the change in some usage situations and then later in other usage situations.

similarities with other languages

- ◆ The history of multilingualism and language change in Japan is in certain ways similar to that of other places.
- ◆ For example, the development of a national language in Italy happened during the creation of modern Italy.
- ◆ Similarly, the Fascists in Italy encouraged the use of standard Italian and discouraged the use of regional and local dialects.

Italy was created during the Meiji Era 明治時代

- ◆ The Italian Peninsula was a patchwork of countries with different regional languages before 1858.
- ◆ After 1870, many Italians felt a need for a standard Italian language for the newly unified nation.



further reading

- ◆ B. Frellesvig (2010) *A History of the Japanese Language* (Cambridge University Press).
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- ◆ S. R. Ramsey (2004) "The Japanese Language and the Making of Tradition", *Japanese Language and Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 81-110.
- ◆ J. DeChicchis (2000) "International precedents for multilingual initiatives in Japan", in R. E. Asher & R. Harris (eds.), *Linguisticoliterary* (Delhi: Pilgrims Book, pp. 134-145).
- ◆ J. Maher (1996), "North Kyushu Creole: A language-contact model for the origins of Japanese", in D. Denoon, M. Hudson, G. McCormack & T. Morris-Suzuki (eds.), *Multicultural Japan: Palaeolithic to Postmodern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 31-45).
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- ◆ R. Miller (1980) *Origins of the Japanese language: Lectures in Japan during the academic year, 1977–78* (Seattle: University of Washington Press).