



Languages & Scripts of East Asia

Asia for Educators

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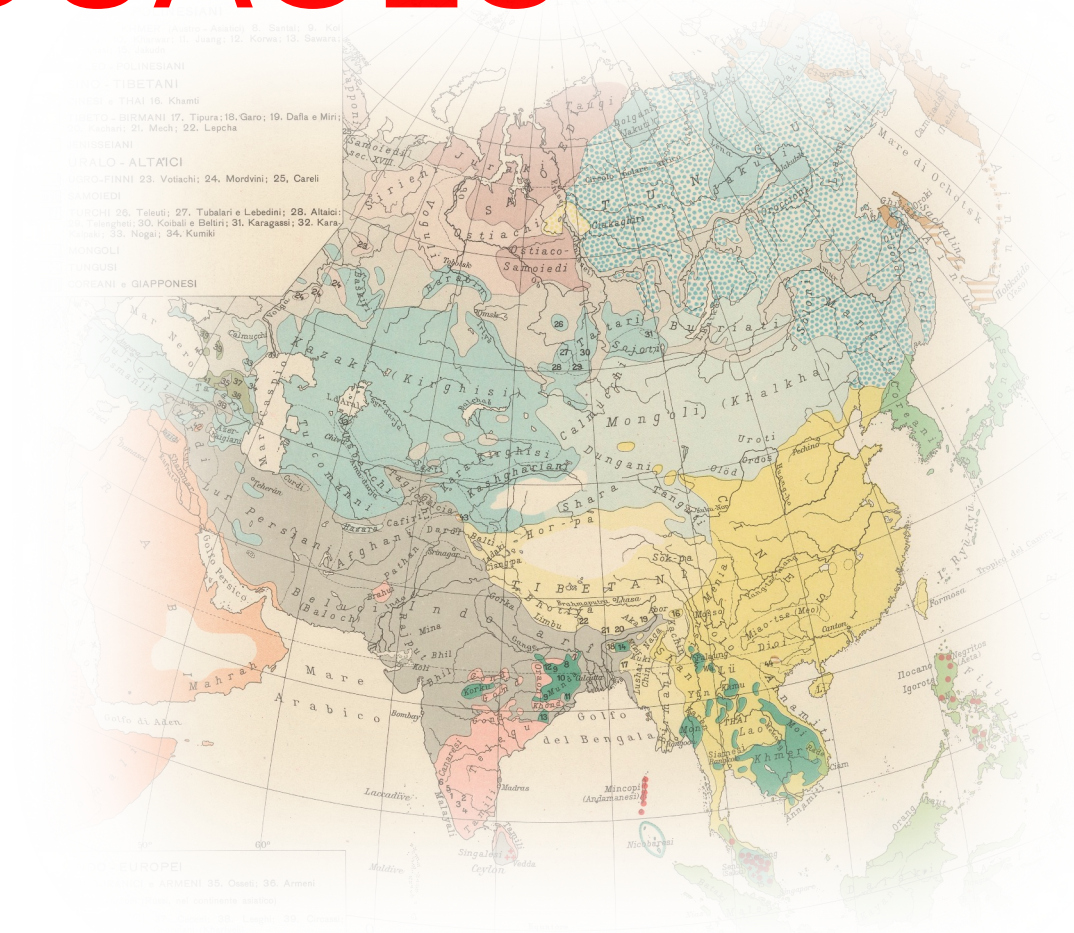


Asia Etnografico – Linguistica
(Ethnographic & linguistic map of Asia)
Renato Biasutti, Touring Club Italiano, 1928-1940

1. SPOKEN LANGUAGES

of Eastern Asia

...Eightish major language families...



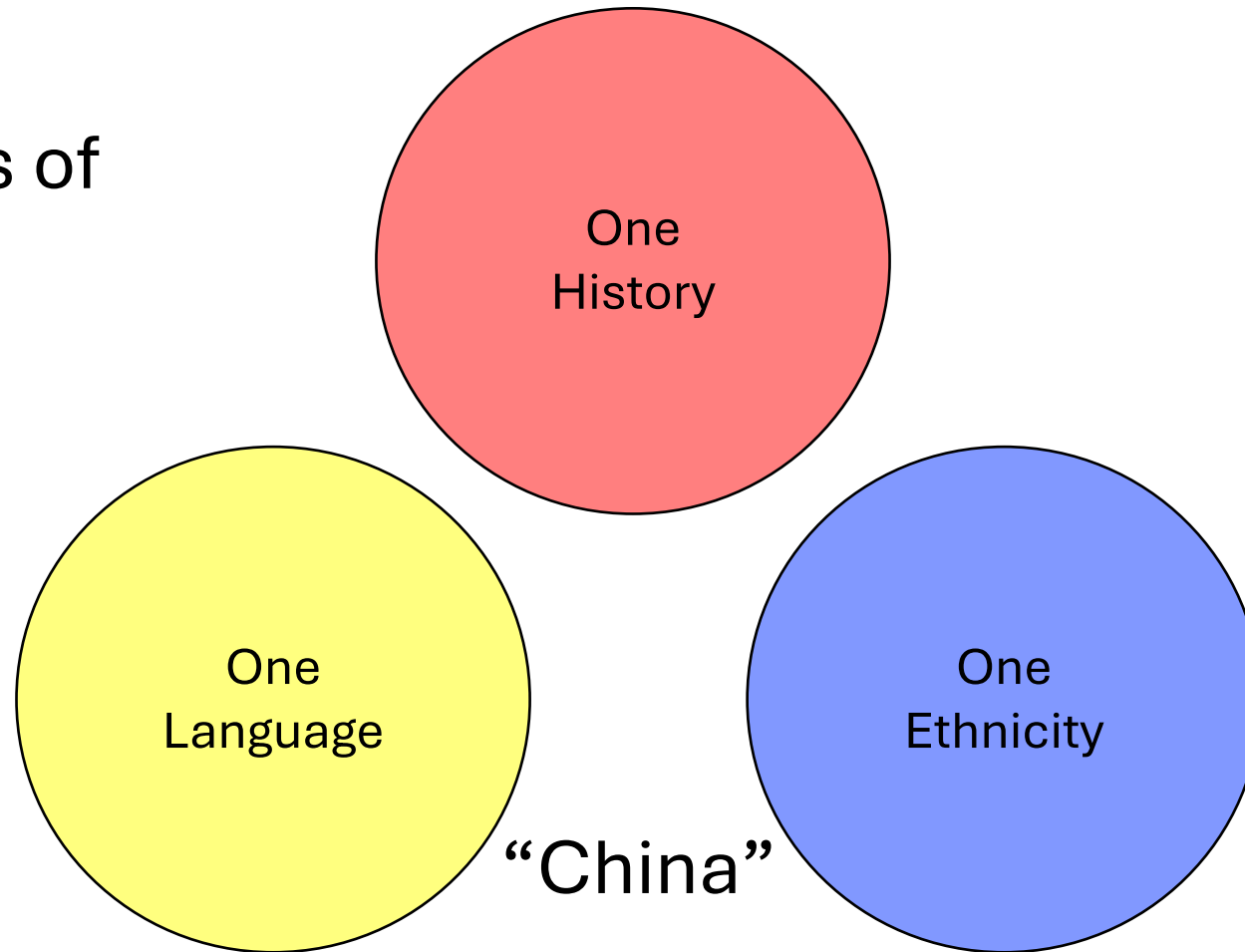
WHAT IS A LANGUAGE FAMILY?

1. A group of genealogically related languages, believed to descend from a shared, common ancestor
 - Think of your own family tree, with ancestors at the top, and descendants at the bottom
2. Spoken language diversifies naturally, because language is transmitted from one generation to another
 - Variation is always present in language. Changes are called “innovations.”
3. When innovations in one speaker population’s dialect grow to the point where it is no longer mutually intelligible with the rest of the speaker population, a new language is born.
 - This is called linguistic diversification.

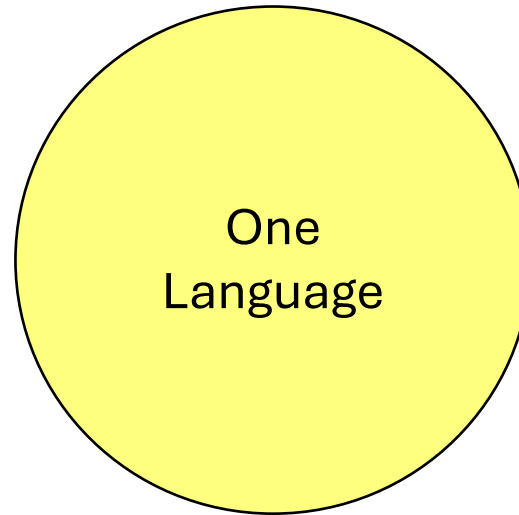
WHAT ISN'T A LANGUAGE FAMILY?

1. A language family does not equal a people, ethnicity, nation, or culture
 - The Chinese (or “Sinitic”) Language family is not the same thing as the Chinese people
 - The history of the Sinitic language family is not the same thing as the history of the Sinitic or Chinese people(s)
2. Communities adopt or abandon language frequently over history
3. Conflating language, ethnicity, and culture is a modern nationalist habit, and often at odds with actual historical or linguistic reality

Nationalist Constructions of Identity



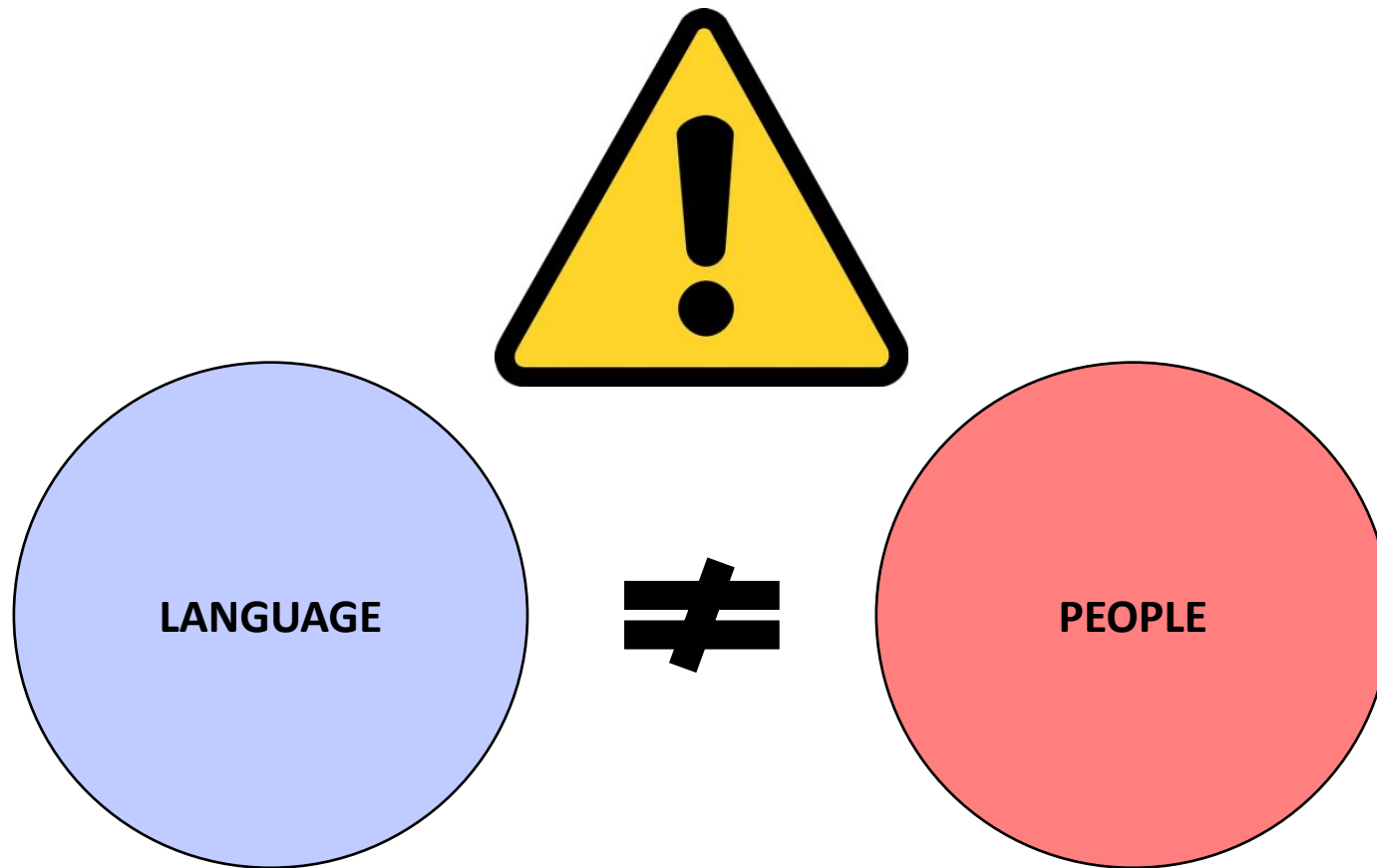
Nationalism and Language

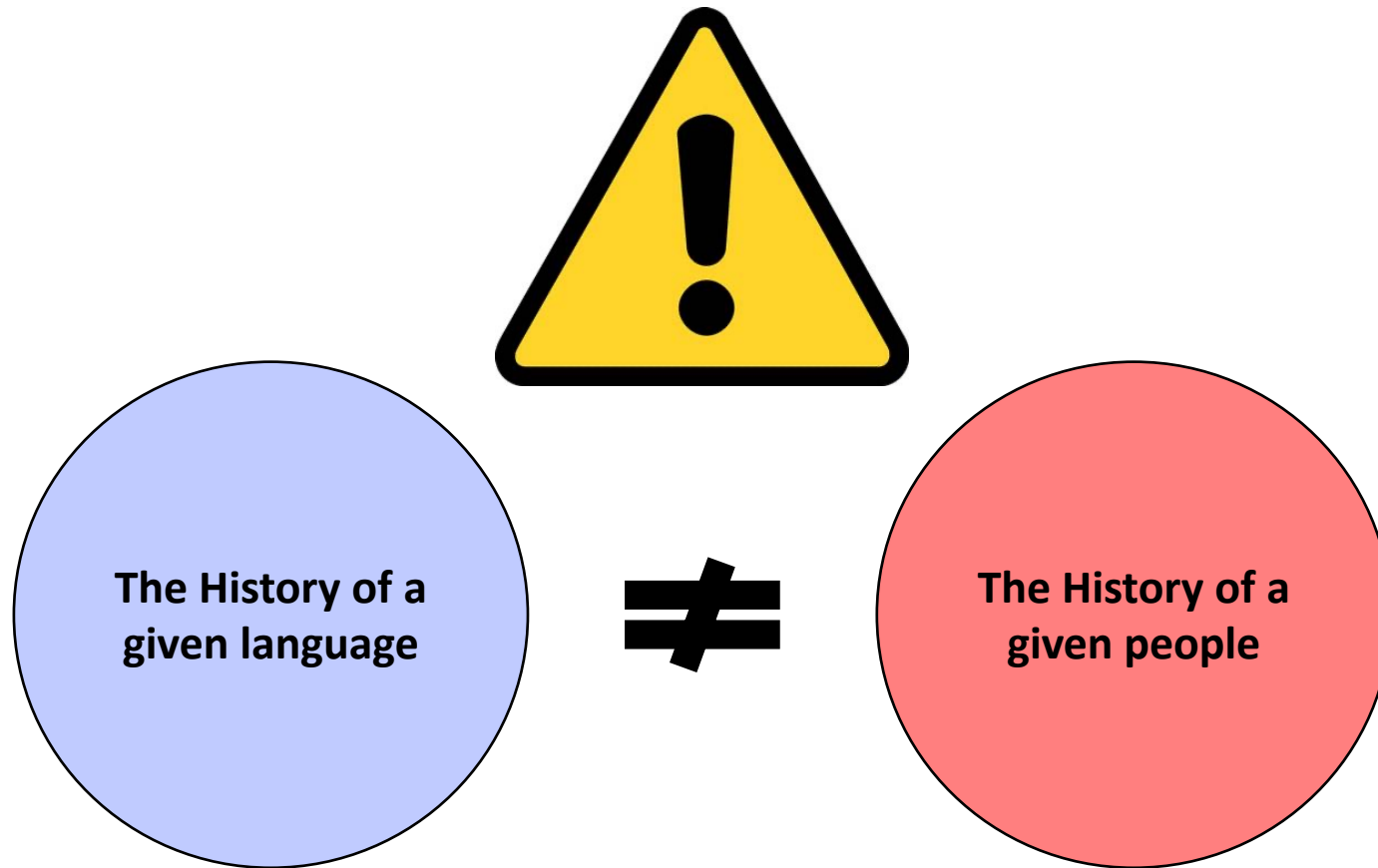


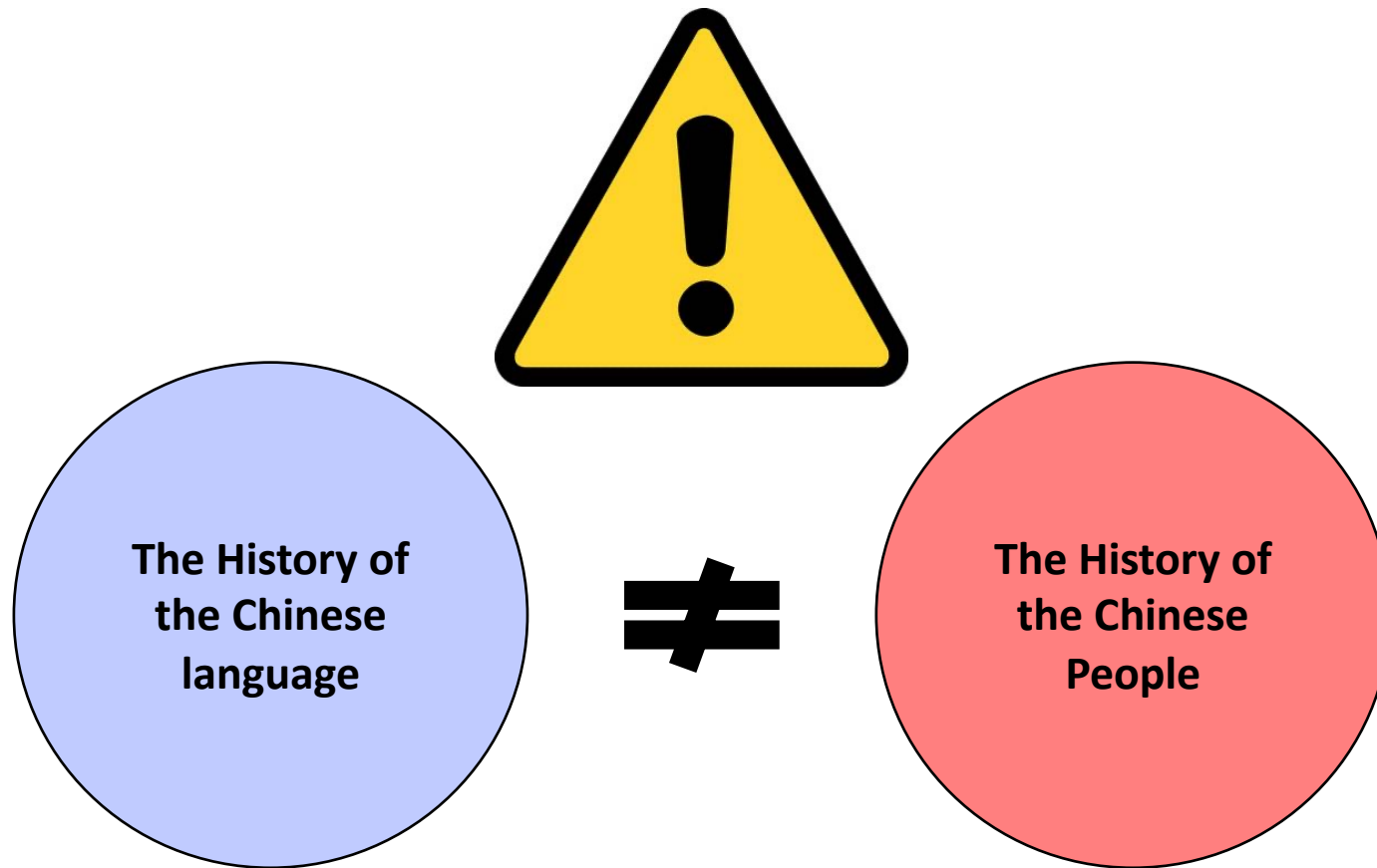
“Chinese”

Yue
Hakka
Min
Wu
Xiang
Etc.

This is may be a cultural and political reality. But
linguistically (and historically), it's untenable.







EIGHTISH LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EASTERN ASIA

Altaic

Austronesian

Austroasiatic

Hmong-Mien

Japonic

Koreanic

Kra-Dai

Sino-Tibetan

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EIGHTISH LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EASTERN ASIA

Altaic

E.g. Mongolian,
Manchu, Uyghur,
etc.

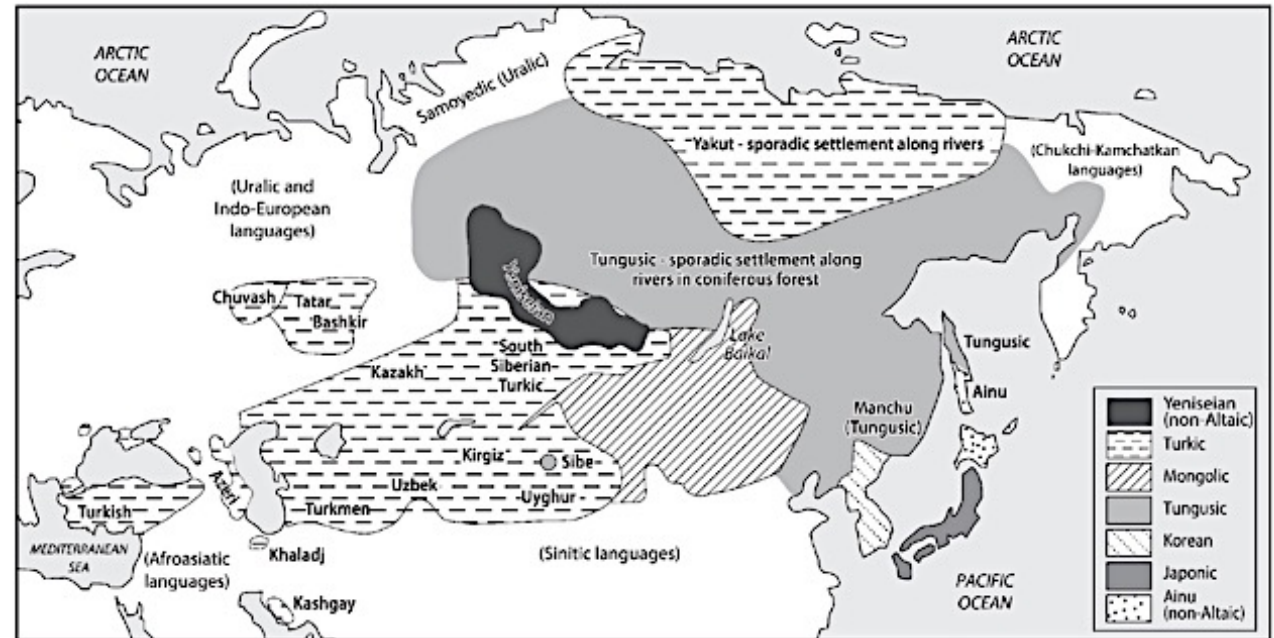


Figure 7.6 Map to show the likely generalized distributions of the Altaic languages prior to the recent expansions of Russian and Chinese. The boundaries are approximate and do not accurately reflect current distributions, especially for the Tungusic, Mongolic, and some Turkic languages that are spoken today only in small enclaves. Also shown is the recorded distribution of the Yeniseian languages, discussed in Chapter 5, from Kari and Potter 2010, Map B. Background map by Multimedia Services, ANU, using data from Ruhlen 1987.

EIGHTISH LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EASTERN ASIA

Altaic

Now sometimes argued to include the Japonic and/or Koreanic language families...

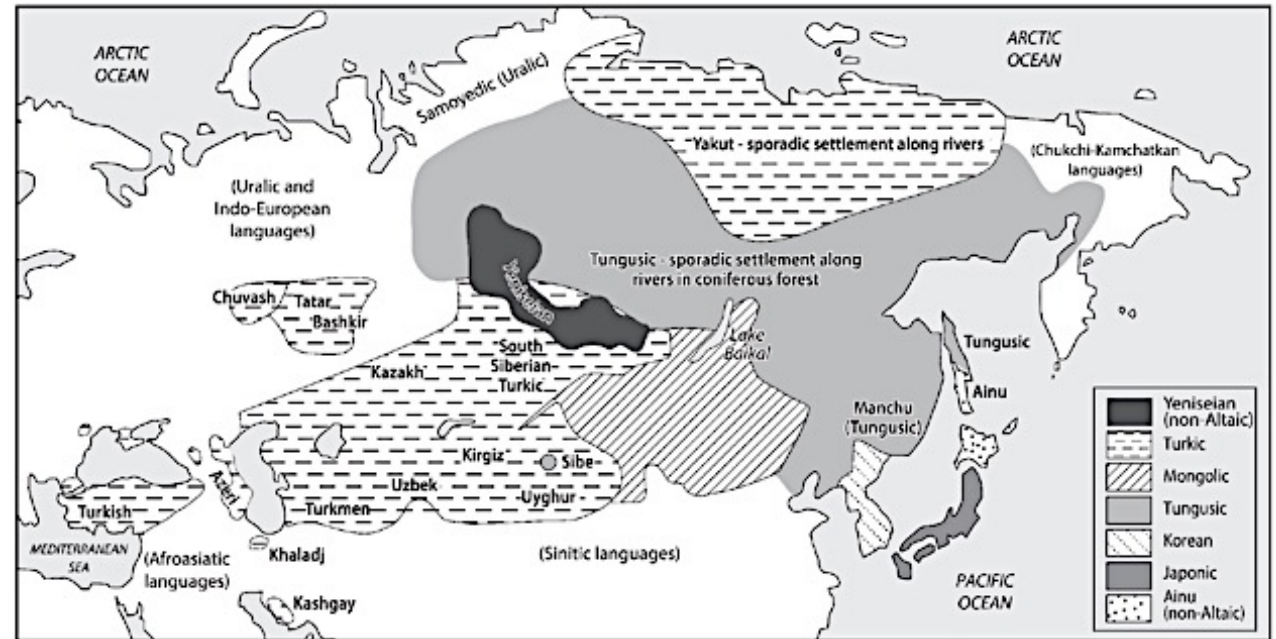


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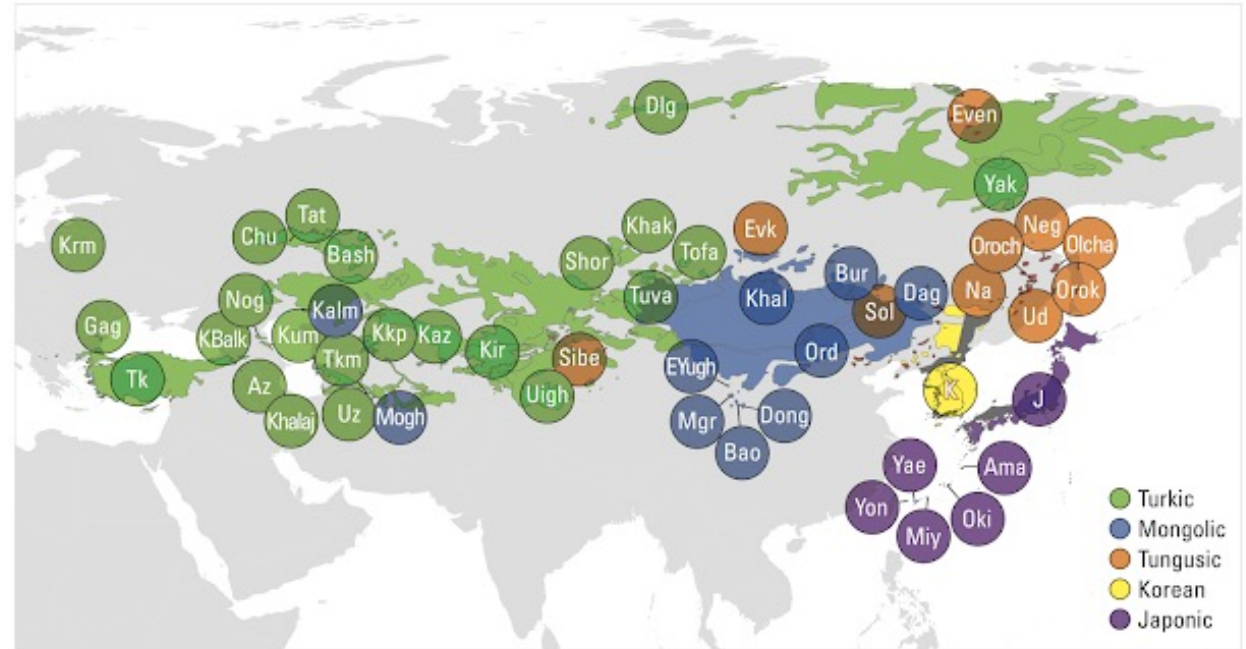


Figure 1. The distribution of the Transeurasian languages. Abbreviations for languages are explained as follows: Ama.: Amami; Az.: Azerbaijani; Bao.: Bao'an; Bash.: Bashkir; Bur.: Buriat; Chu.: Chuvash; Dag.: Dagur; Dlg.: Dolgan; Dong.: Dongxiang; EYugh.: Eastern Yughur; Even: Even; Evk.: Evenki; Gag.: Gagauz; J.: Japanese; Kalm.: Kalmuk; KBalk.: Karachay-Balkar; Krm.: Karaim; Kkp.: Karakalpak; Kaz.: Kazakh; Khak.: Khakas; Khal.: Khalkha; Khalaj.: Khalaj; Kir.: Kirgiz; K.: Korean; Kum.: Kumyk; Ma.: Manchu; MK: Middle Korean; MMo.: Middle Mongolian; Miy.: Miyako; Mogh.: Moghol; Mgr.: Monguor; Na.: Nanai; Neg.: Negidal; Nog.: Nogai; Oki.: Okinawa; Olcha: Olcha; OJ: Old Japanese; OT: Old Turkic; Ord.: Ordos; Oroch: Oroch; Shor: Shor; Sibe: Sibe; Sol: Solon; Tat.: Tatar; Tofa.: Tofalar; Tk.: Turkish; Tkm.: Turkmen; Tuva: Tuva; Ud.: Udehe; Uigh.: Uighur; Uz.: Uzbek; Yae.: Yaeyama; Yak.: Yakut; Yon.: Yonaguni.

EIGHTISH LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EASTERN ASIA

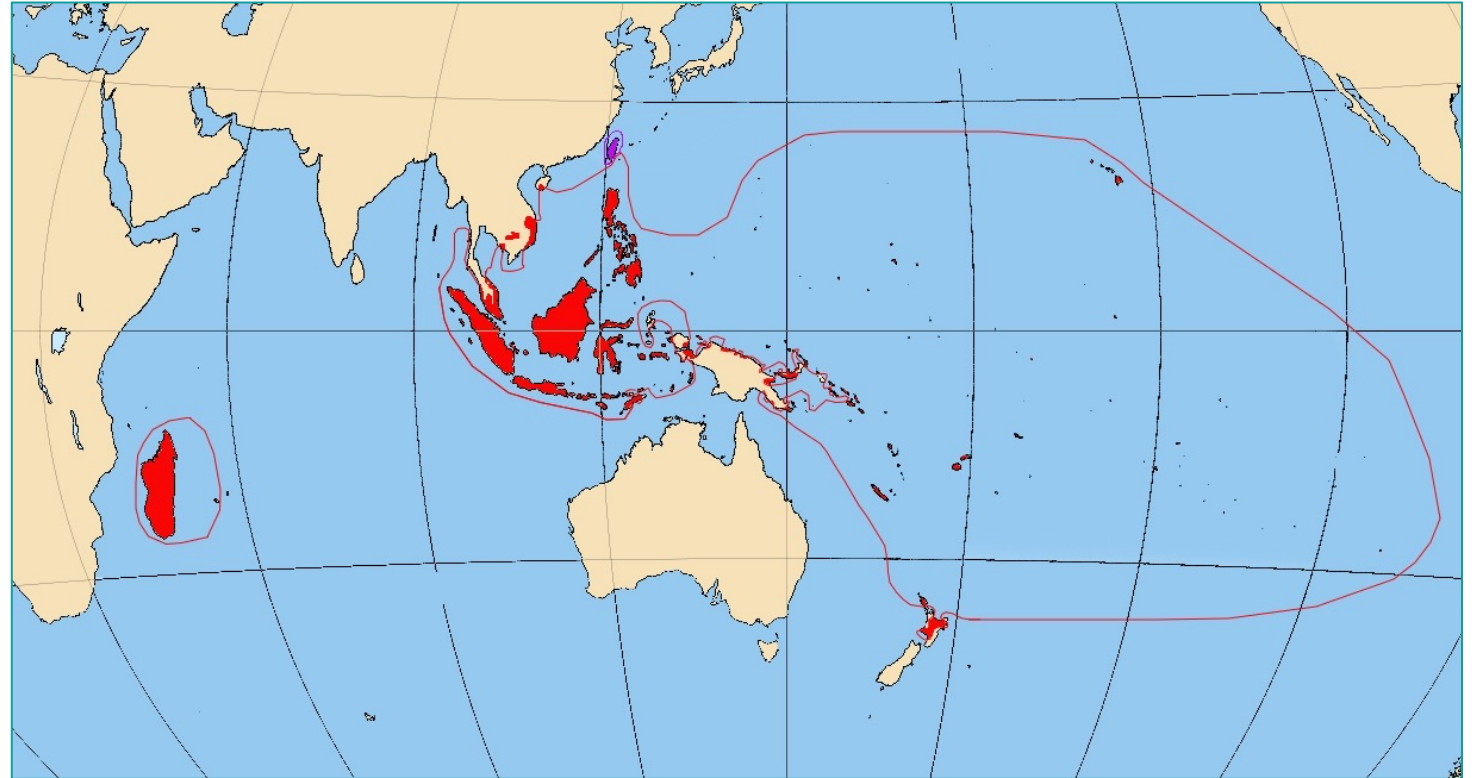
Altaic

EIGHTISH LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EASTERN ASIA

Altaic

Austronesian

E.g. Malay,
Indonesian,
Tagalog, Formosan
languages, etc.



Bellwood (2013: 164)

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Austronesian

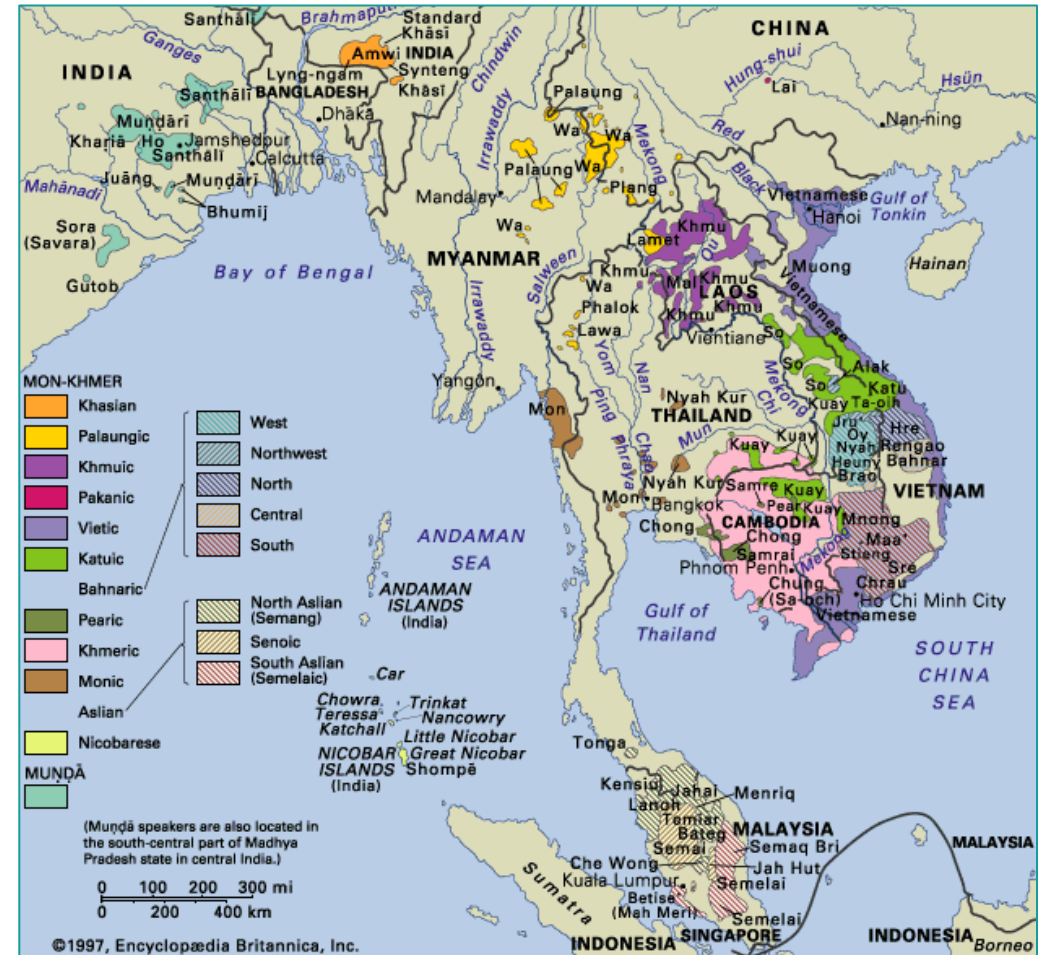
EIGHTISH LANGUAGE FAMILIES IN EASTERN ASIA

Altaic

Austronesian

Austroasiatic

E.g. Vietnamese, Khmer, many
“ethnic minority” languages of
Mainland Southeast Asia



Encyclopædia Britannica, 1997, accessed 7-25-25

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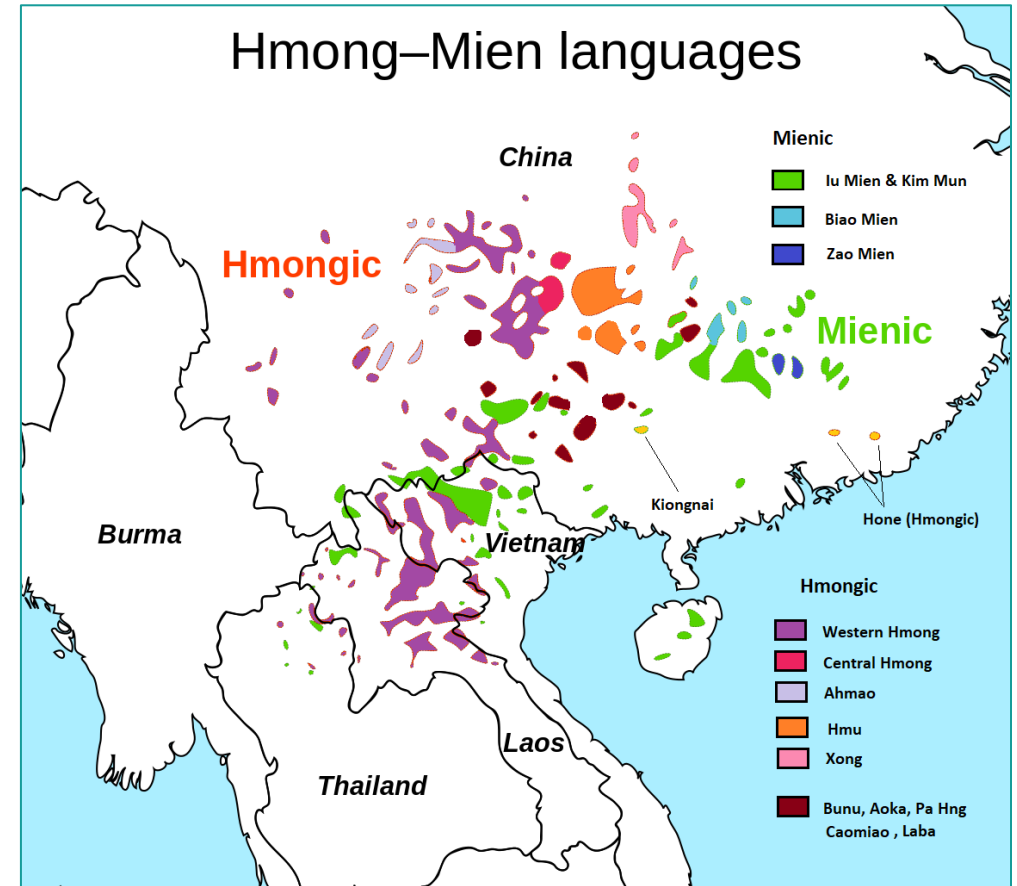
Altaic

Austronesian

Austroasiatic

Hmong-Mien

E.g. Hmong, Mien, various small languages often spoken in the highlands of southeastern Asia



Based on Mutturzikin & Rutgers; Wikipedia 5-31-2020; accessed 7-25-25

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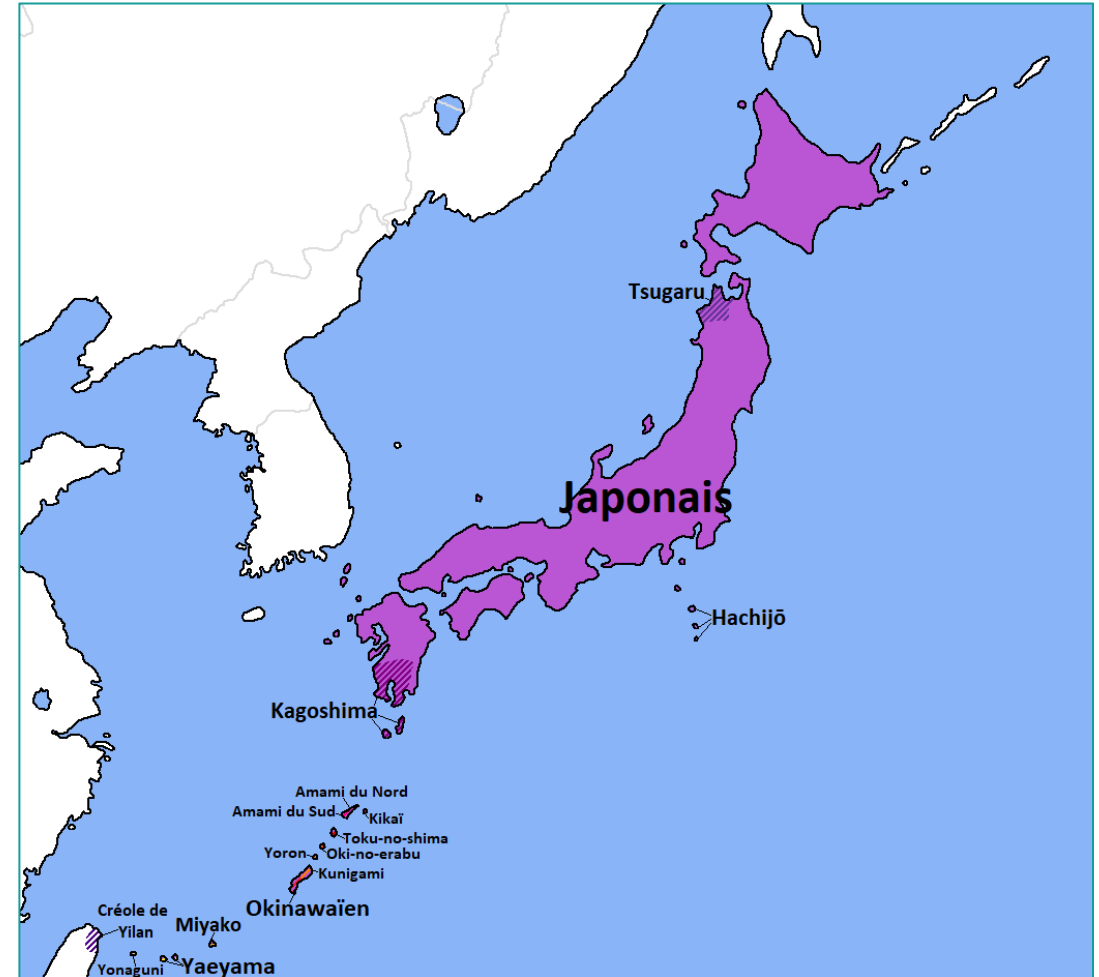
Austronesian

Austroasiatic

Hmong-Mien

Japonic

The Japanese & Ryukuan languages...



Map of Japonic languages according to Vovin & Whitman, Wikipedia 2-22-2022; accessed 7-25-25

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Yeah, Korean. A
mystery!!

Map of Koreanic Dialects, Wikipedia
8-21-22; accessed 7-25-25



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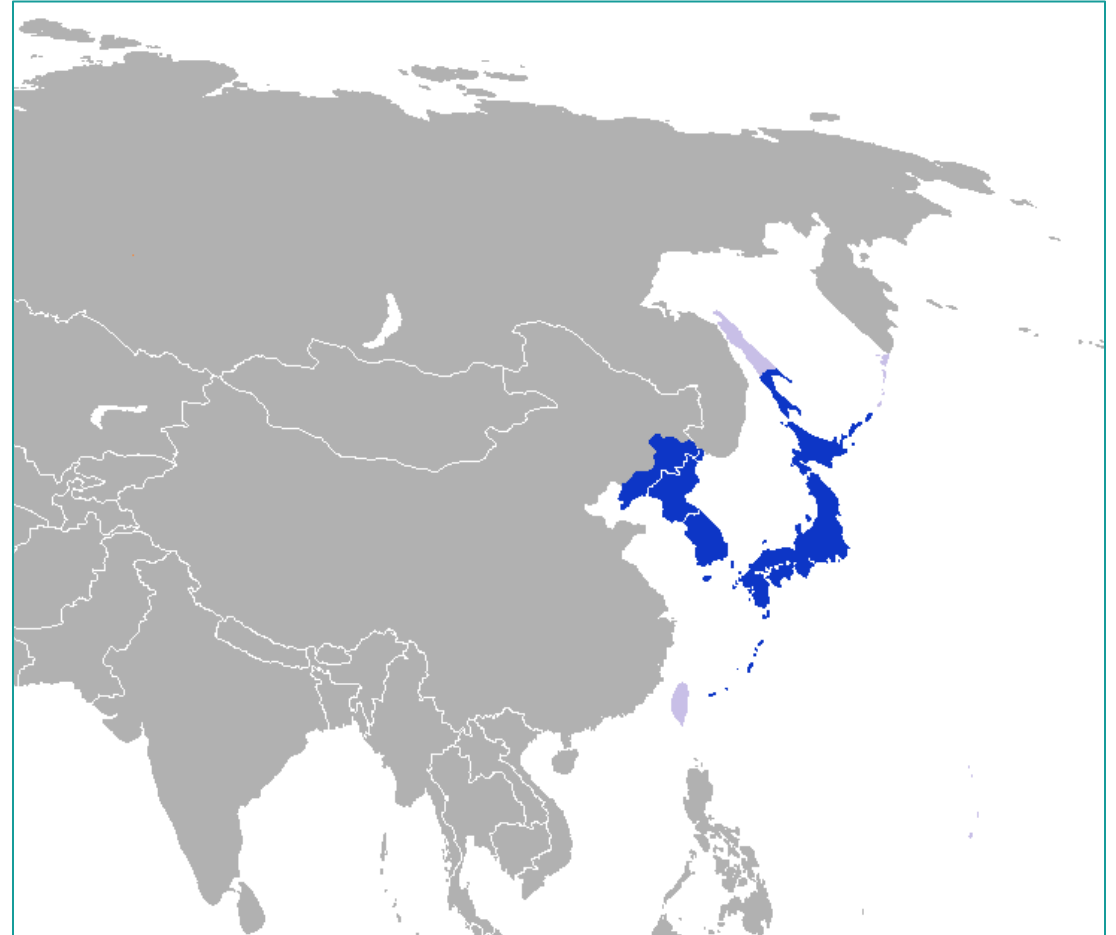
Austroasiatic

Hmong-Mien

Japonic

Koreanic

???



Map of (proposed) Koreo-Japonic Language Family, Wikipedia 6-2-2017; accessed 7-25-25

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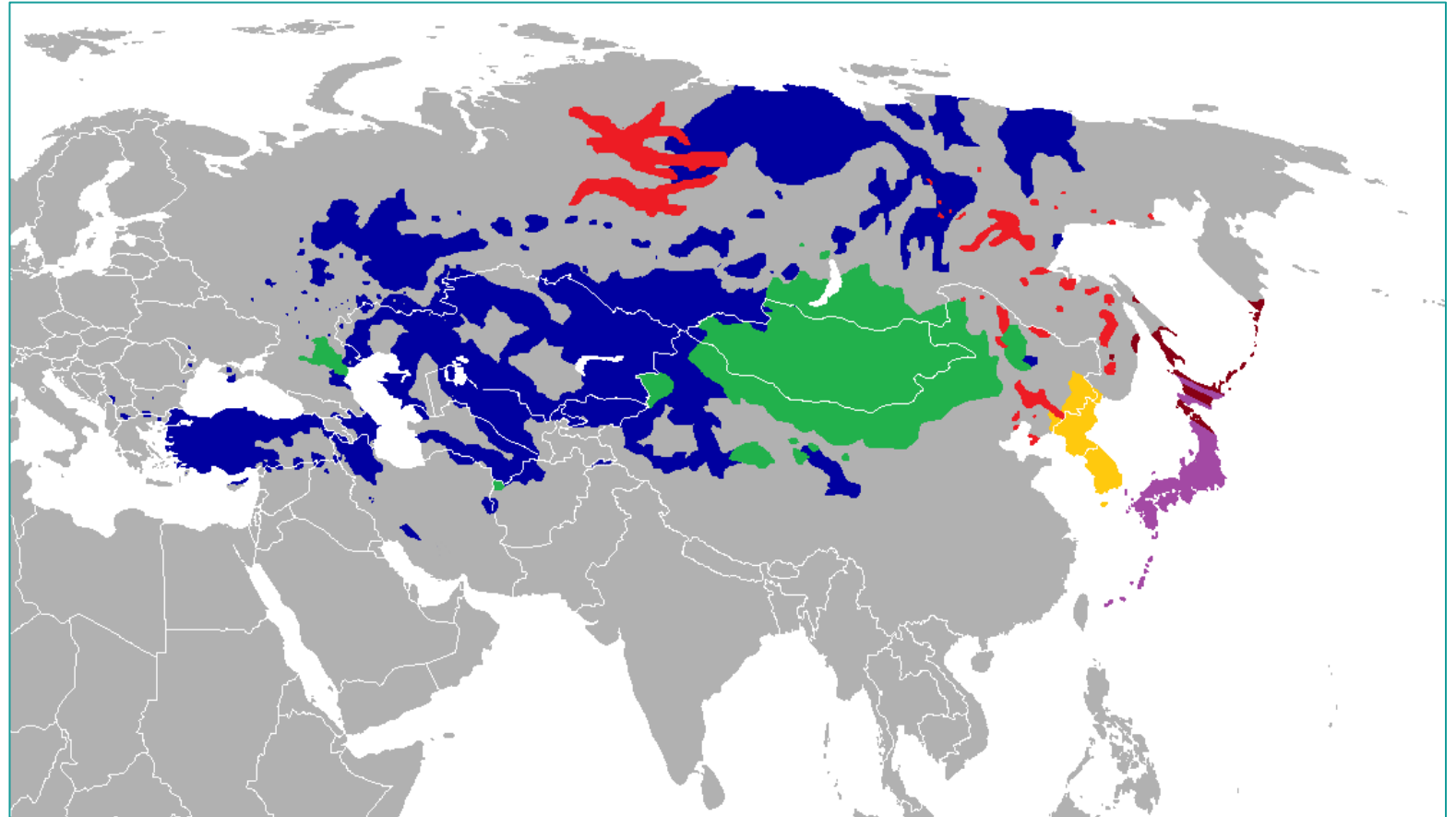
Austroasiatic

Hmong-Mien

Japonic

Koreanic

CAREFUL!!



Map of hypothetical Altaic superfamily, including Japonic, Koreanic, & Aniu; Wikipedia 6-2-2017; accessed 7-25-25

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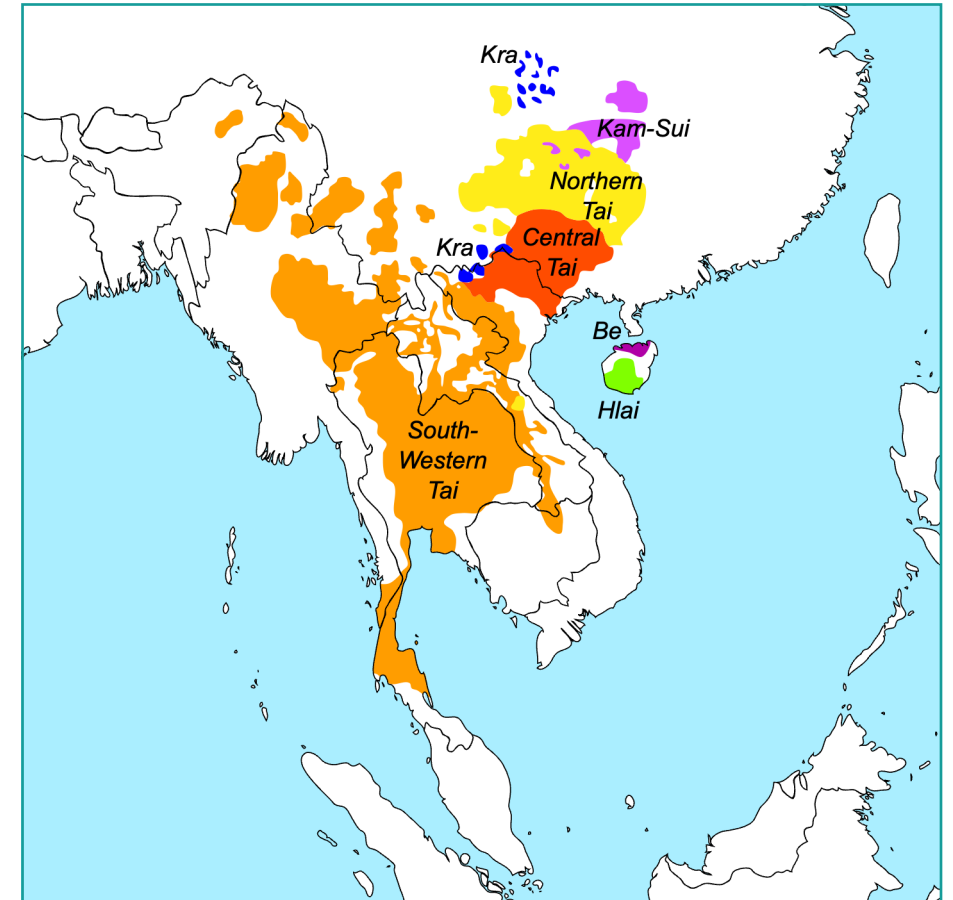
Hmong-Mien

Japonic

Koreanic

Kra-Dai

E.g. Thai, Lao,
Zhuang, Tày
languages, etc.



Map of Kra-Dai languages; Wikipedia 11-15-2008; accessed 7-25-25

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Sino-Tibetan

E.g. Chinese languages, Tibetan, Burmese, etc.



Map of Sino-Tibetan languages; Gutman & Avanzati 2013, cited as Language Gulper by Humans Who Read Grammar



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Sino-Tibetan

**Eight(ish)
families...
...is that all???**

NO.



Attested and Suspected Historical Range of Ainu Languages, Wikipedia
2-10-2011; accessed 7-26-25



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2. SCRIPTS & WRITING in Eastern Asia

and the concept of Cosmopolitan &
Vernacular



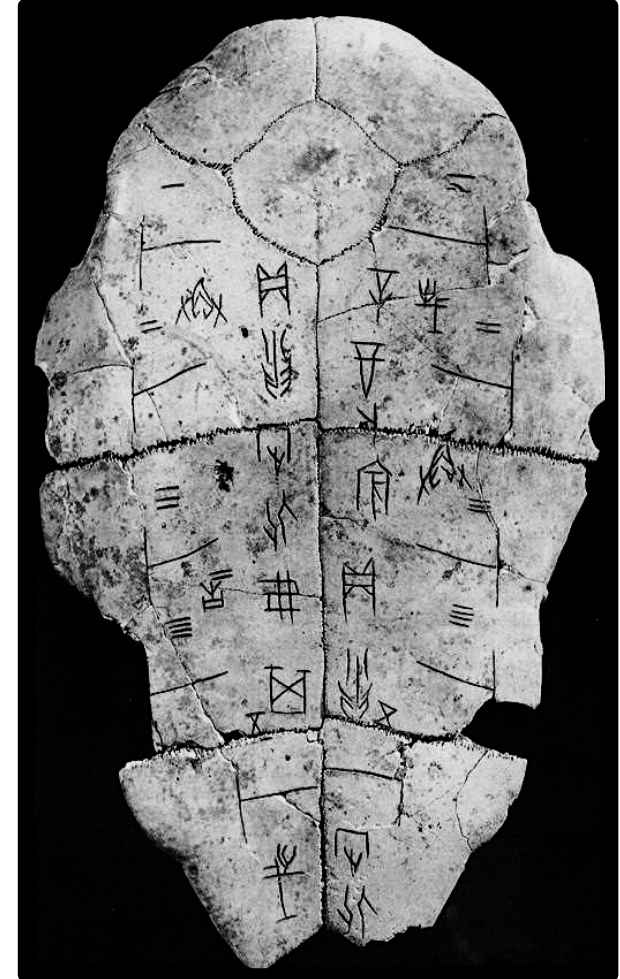
SCRIPT AND LANGUAGE

- Not the same thing!
- Writing is a technology
- English is written with the Roman alphabet
- Vietnamese also uses the Roman alphabet!

**Tiếng Việt cũng sử dụng
bảng chữ cái La Mã!**

SCRIPT AND LANGUAGE

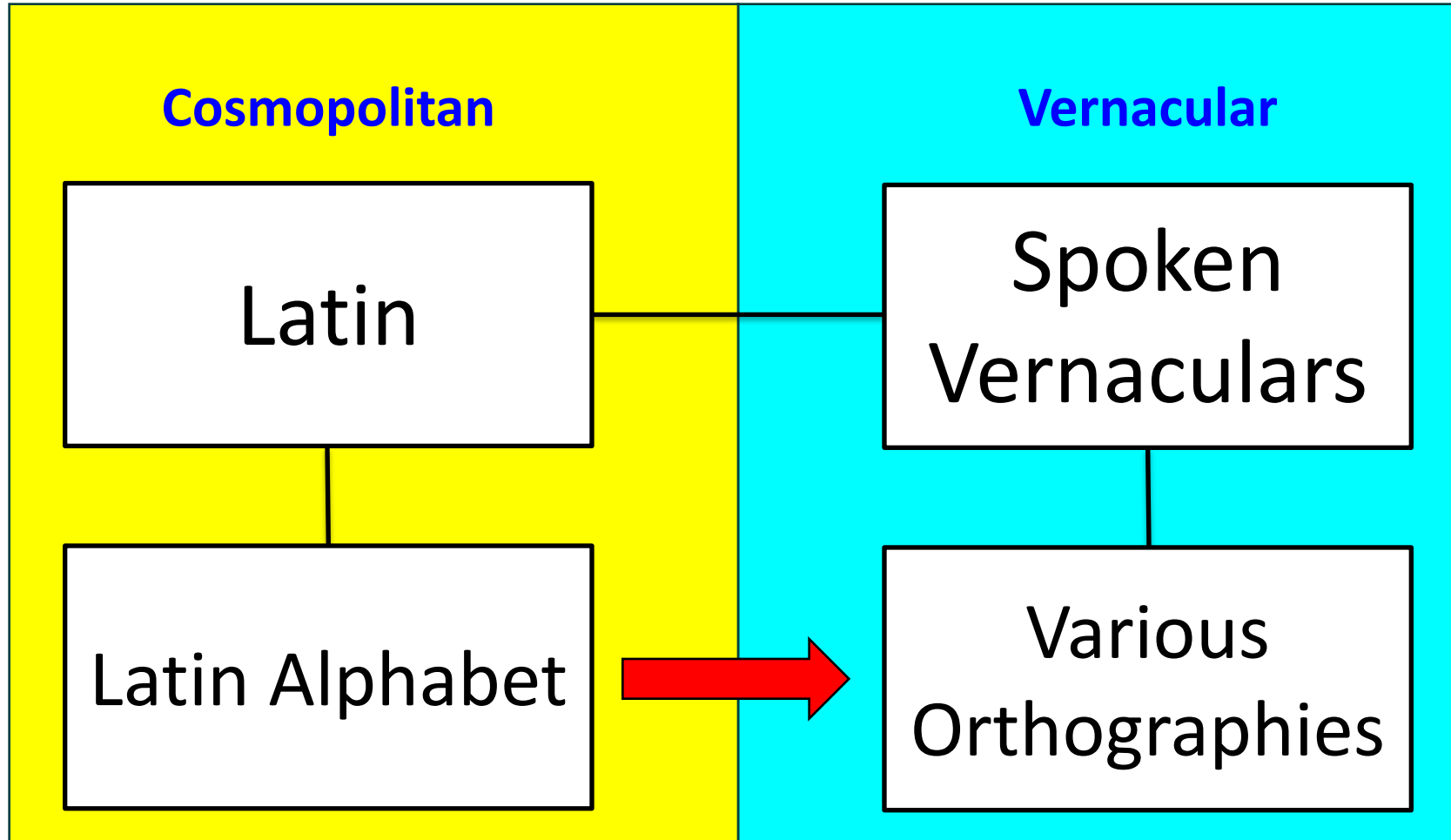
- But script is usually borrowed together with a language...
 - ...at least at first...
- Writing in Eastern Asia began with China in at least the 2nd millennium BCE
- It was then borrowed and adapted throughout the region



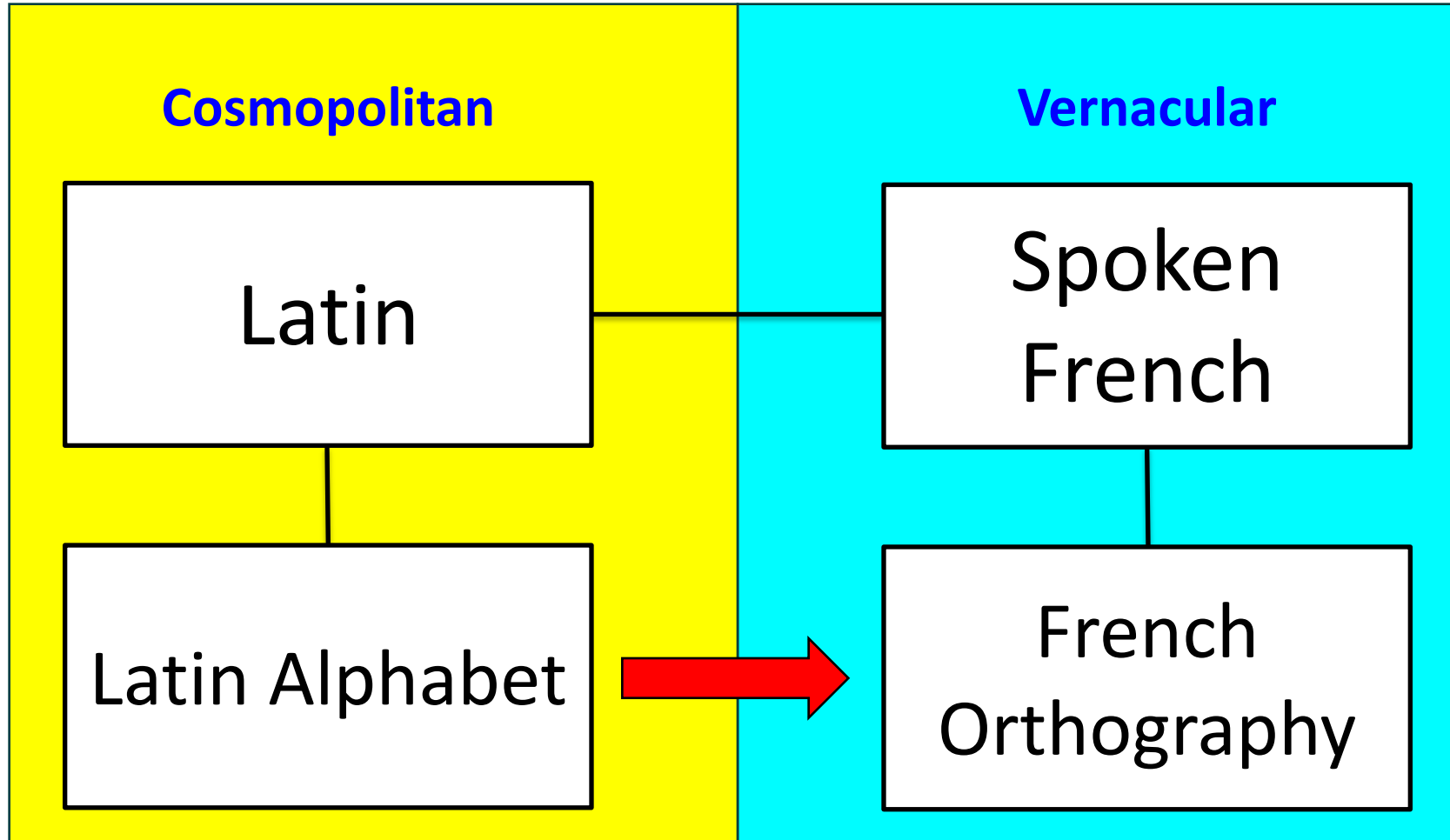
A LITERARY LANGUAGE

- Because China developed writing so early, as other societies in Eastern Asia came into contact, they borrowed both Chinese characters and the Chinese language as their first literary script and language
- This means that the the first experience of literacy for many Eastern Asian societies, was in a language different from their native form of speech.

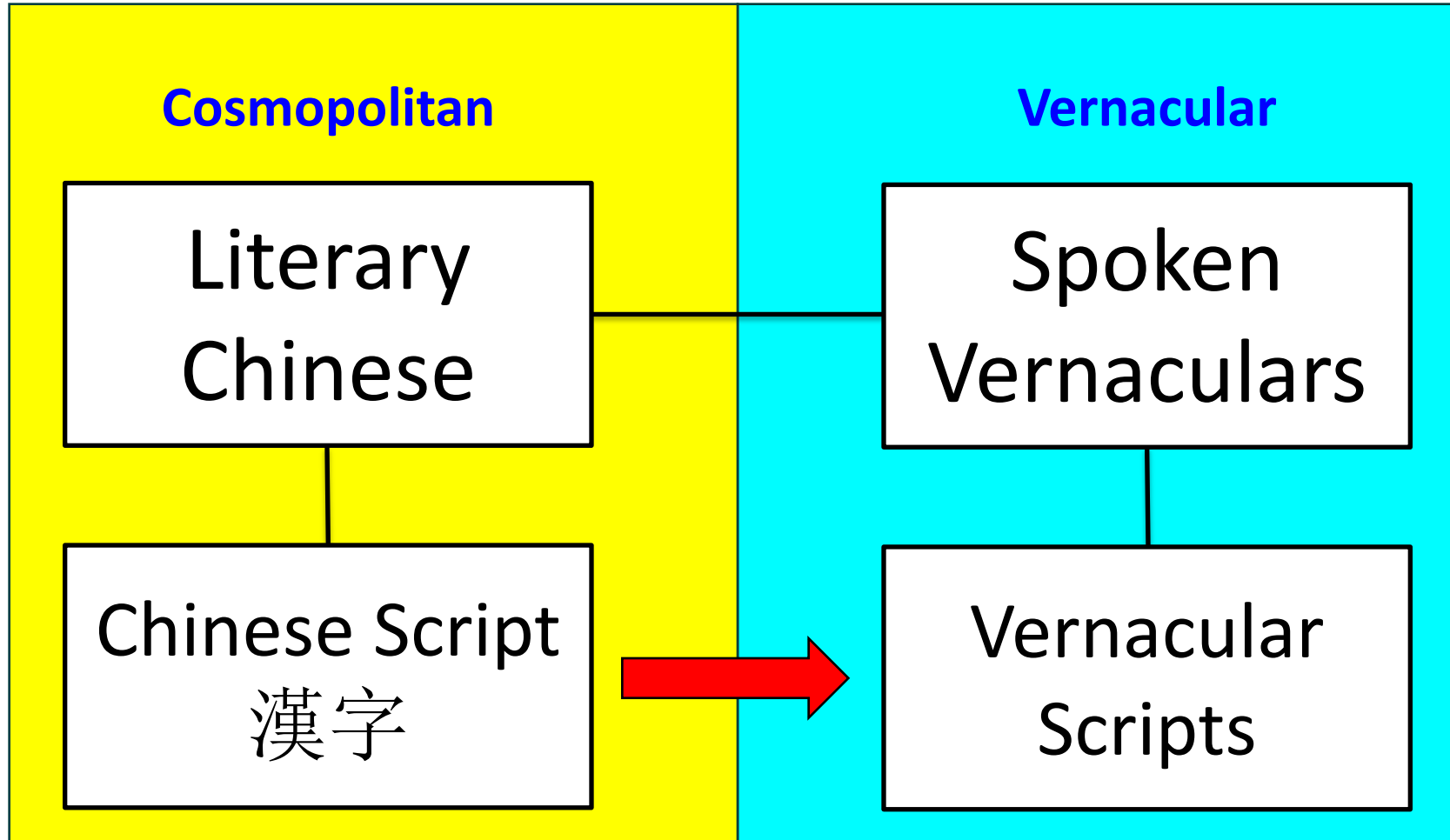
EUROPEAN DIGLOSSIA



EUROPEAN DIGLOSSIA



SINITIC HYPERGLOSSIA



THE CHINESE CASE

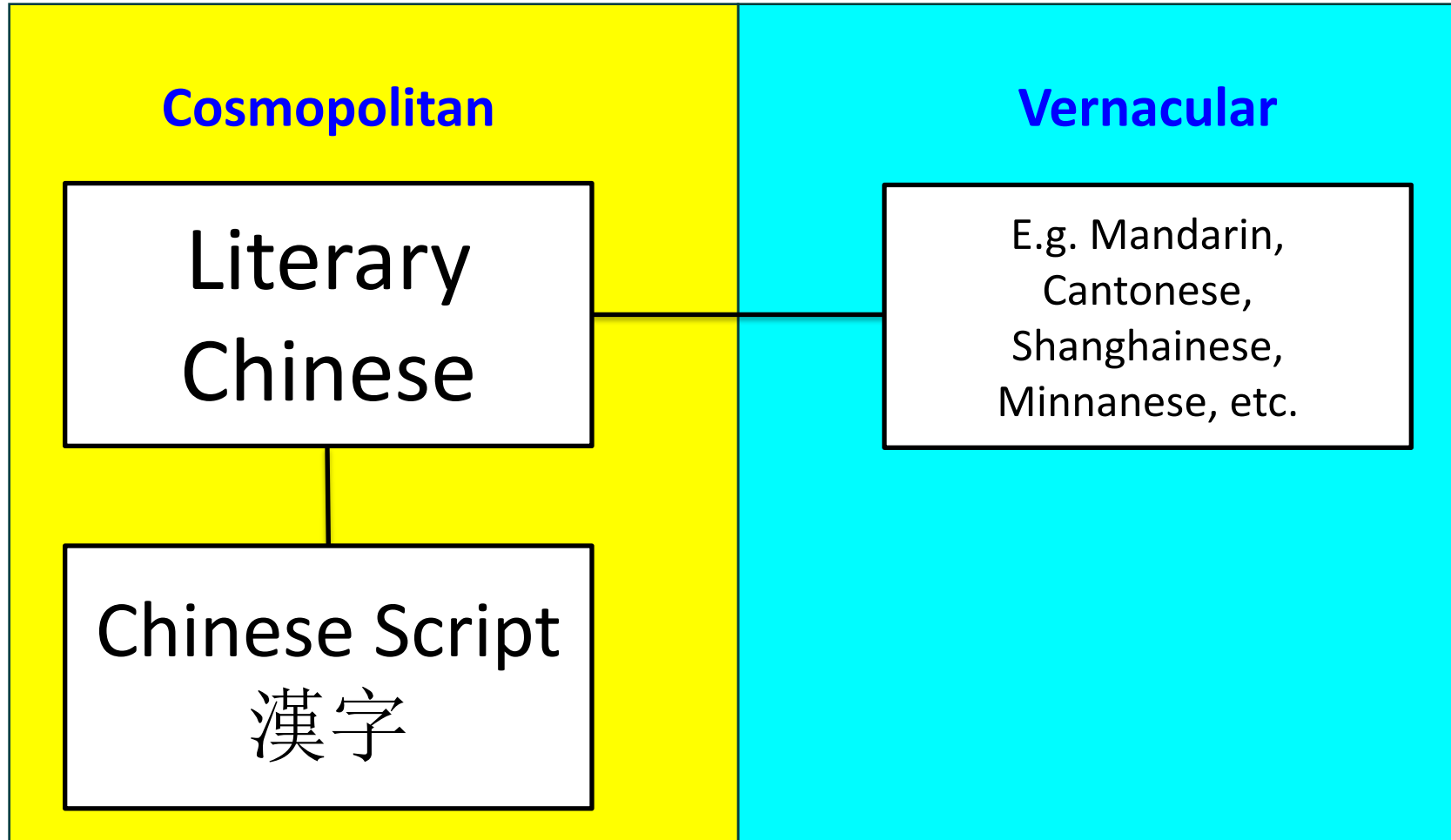
Cosmopolitan

Literary
Chinese

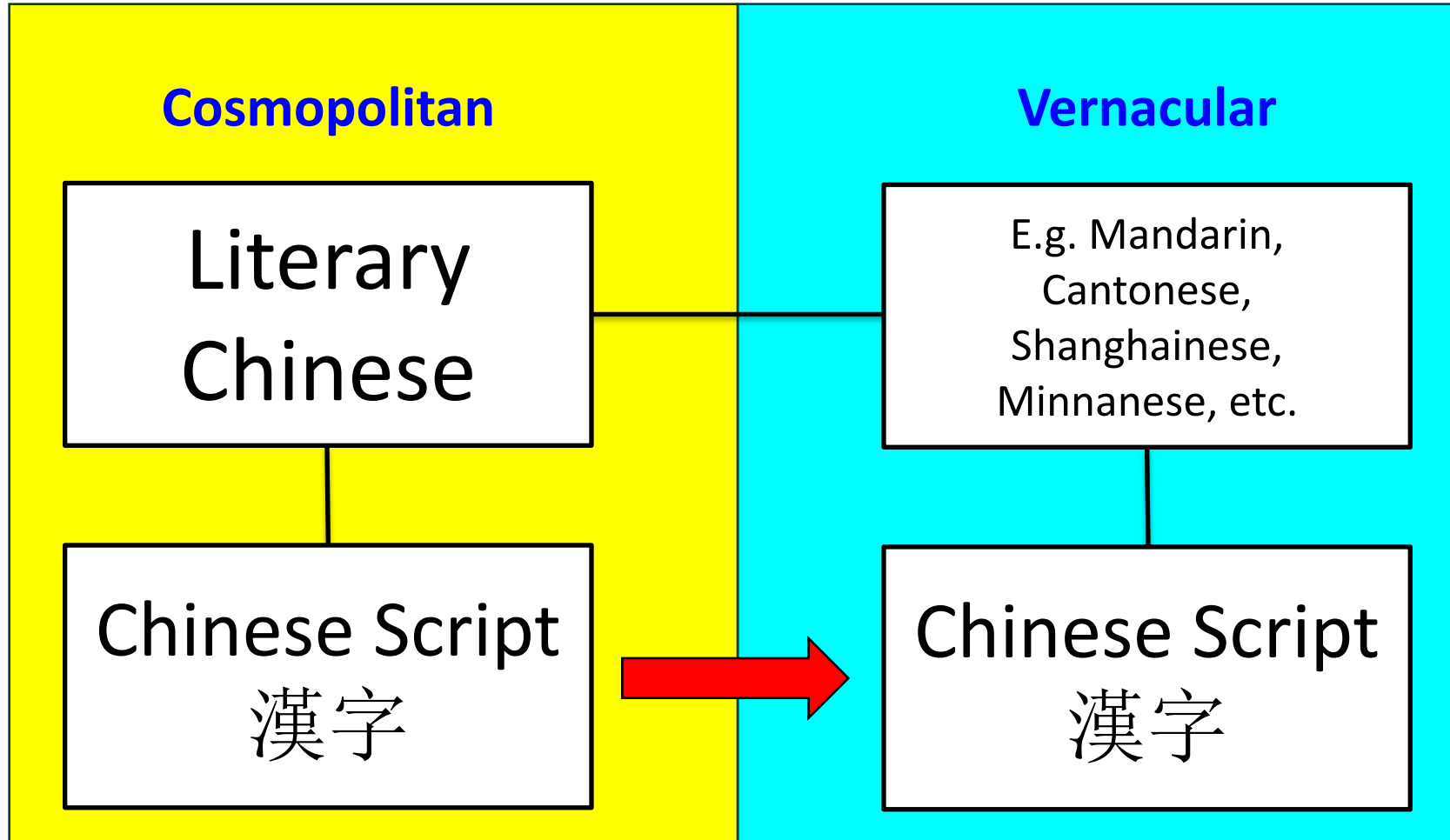
Chinese Script
漢字

Vernacular

THE CHINESE CASE



THE CHINESE CASE



THE VIETNAMESE CASE

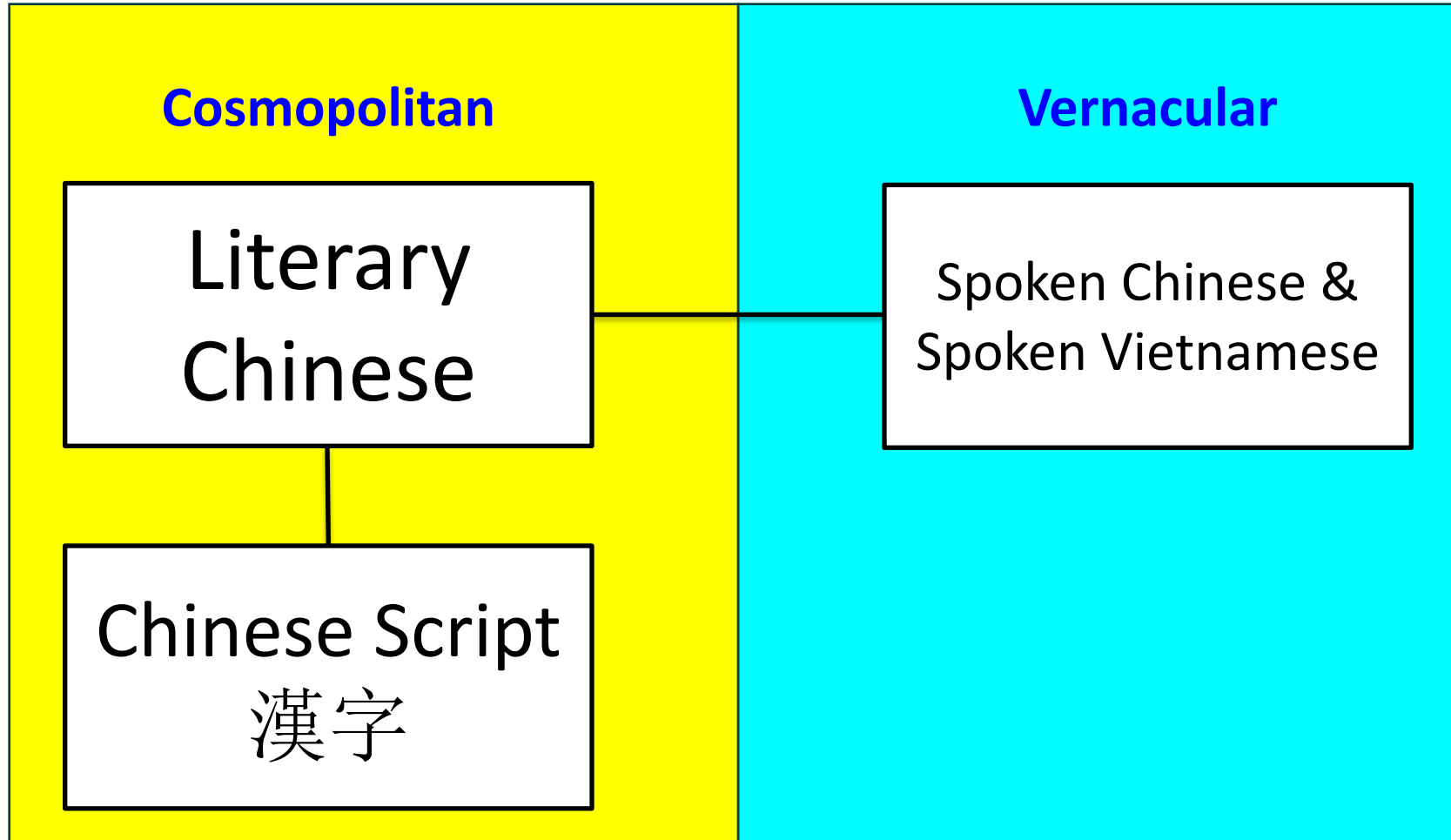
Cosmopolitan

Literary
Chinese

Chinese Script
漢字

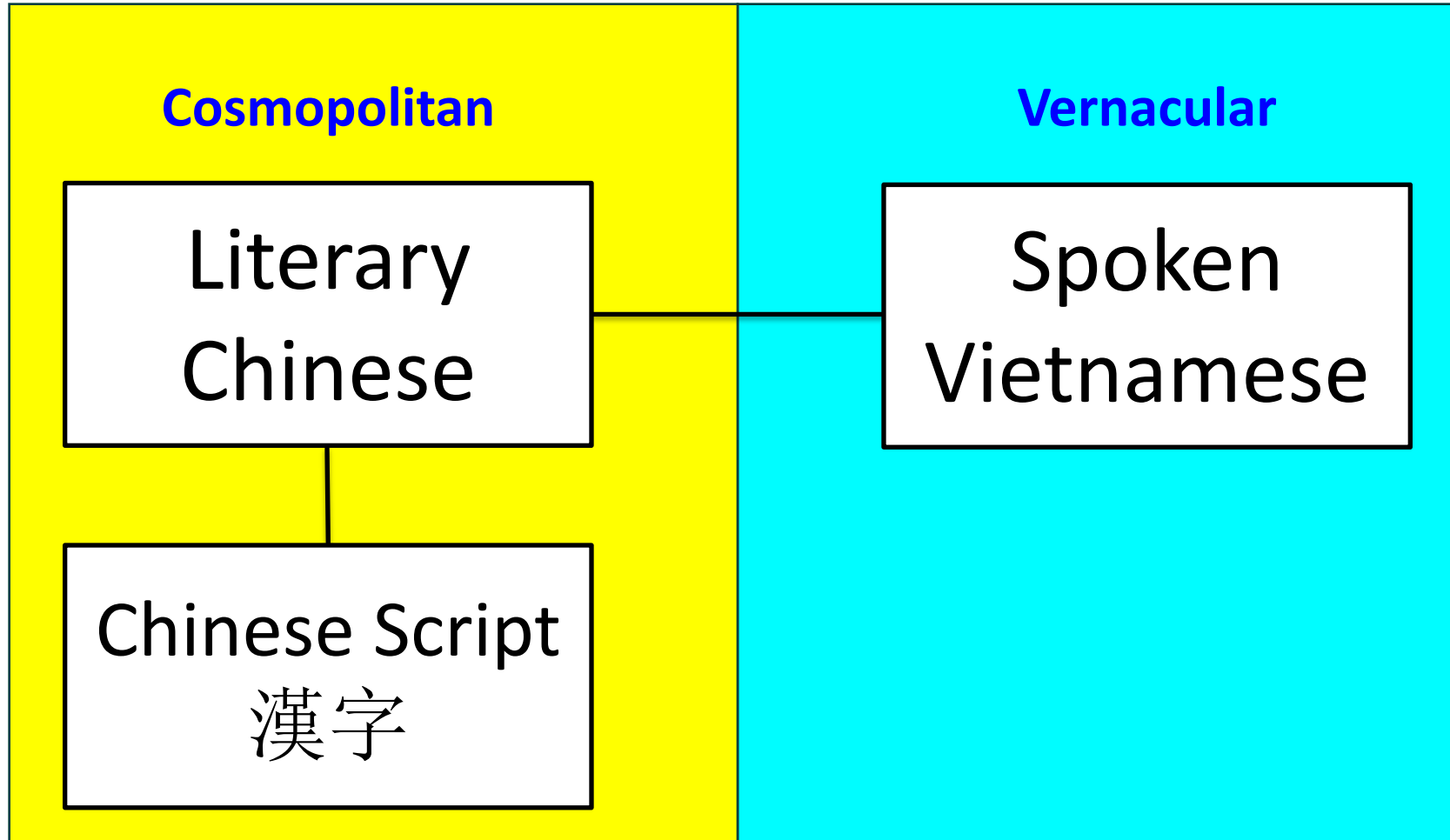
Vernacular

THE VIETNAMESE CASE

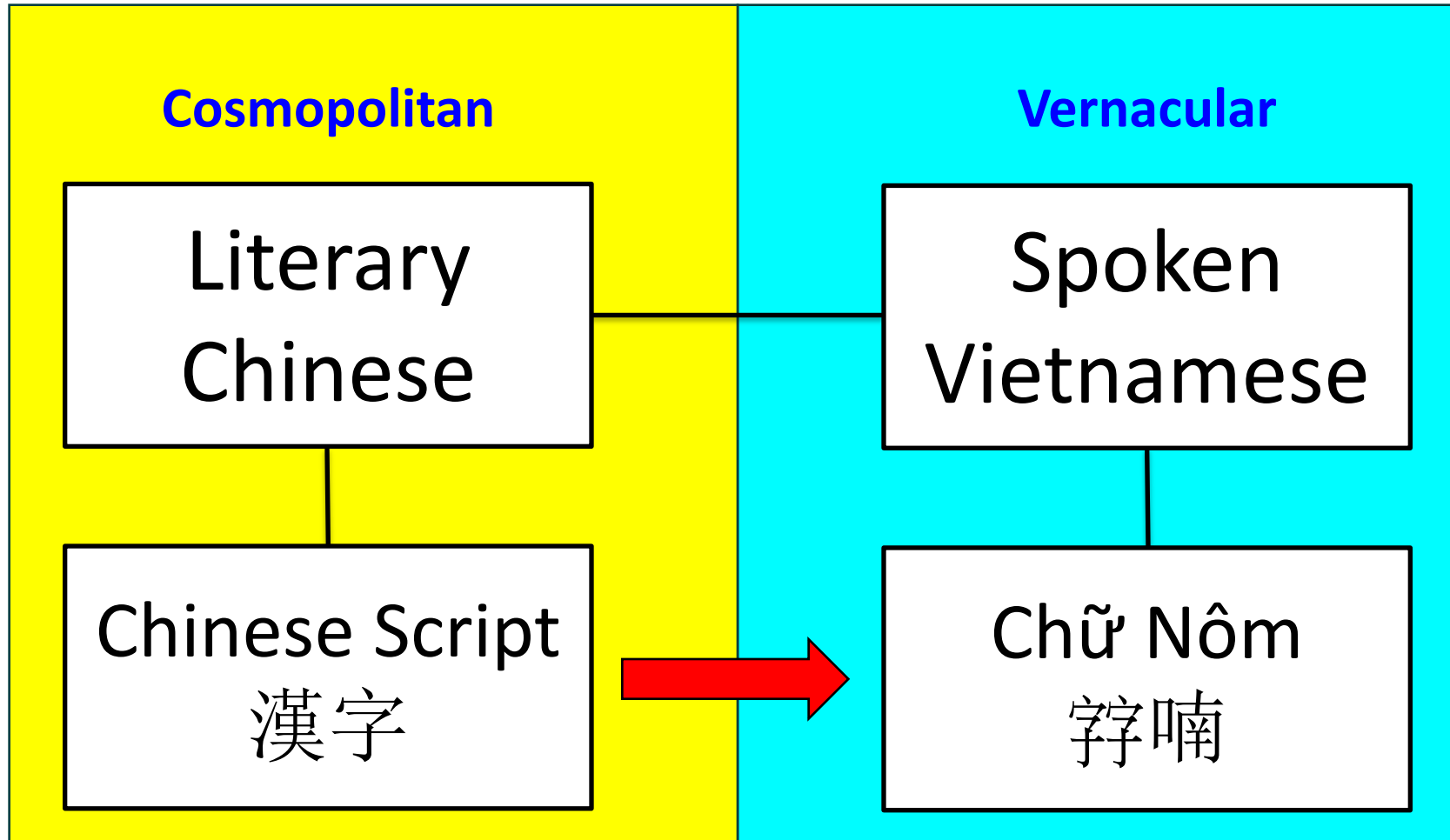


??!!

THE VIETNAMESE CASE



THE VIETNAMESE CASE



THE KOREAN CASE

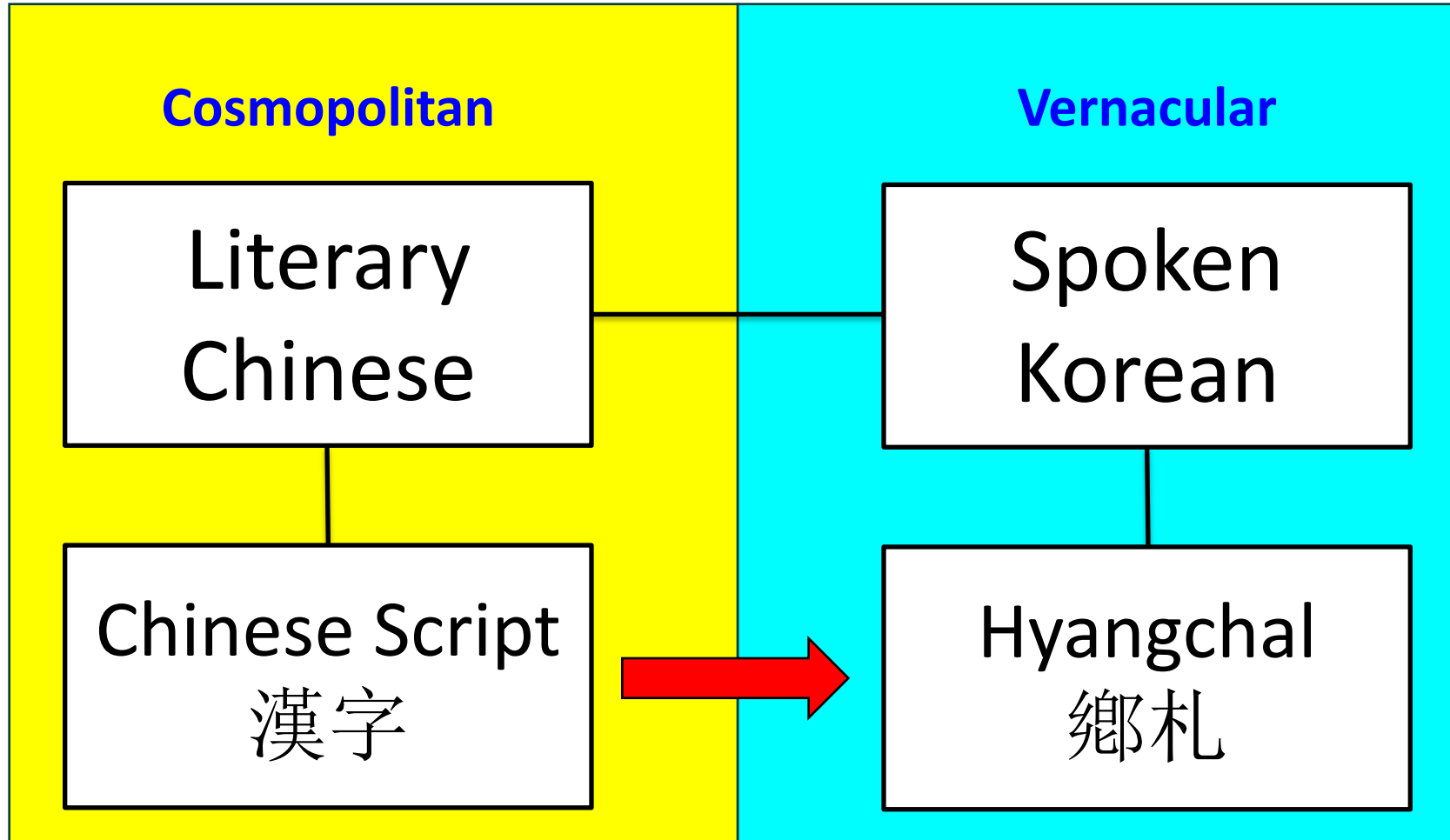
Cosmopolitan

Literary
Chinese

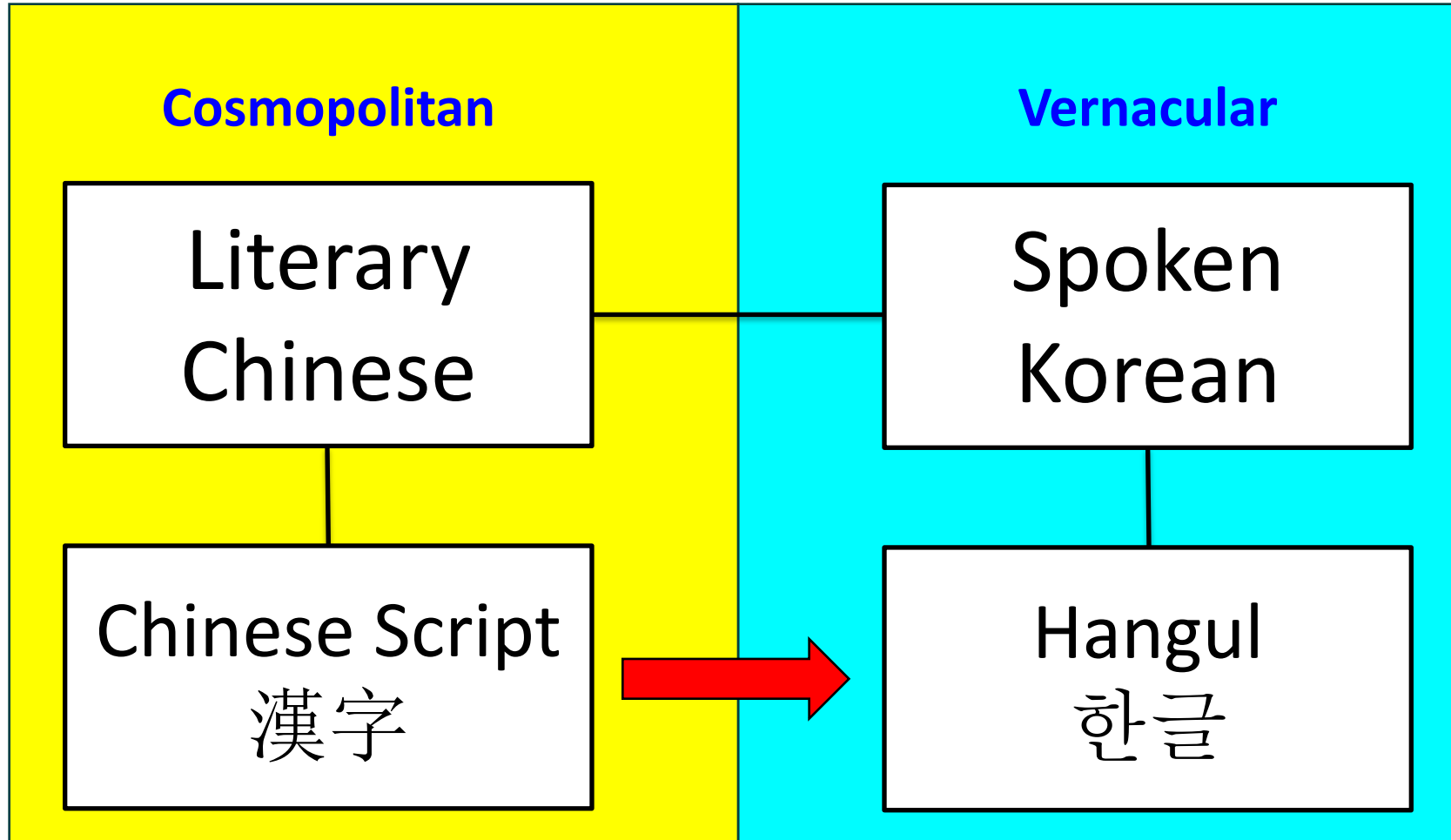
Chinese Script
漢字

Vernacular

THE KOREAN CASE



THE KOREAN CASE



THE JAPANESE CASE

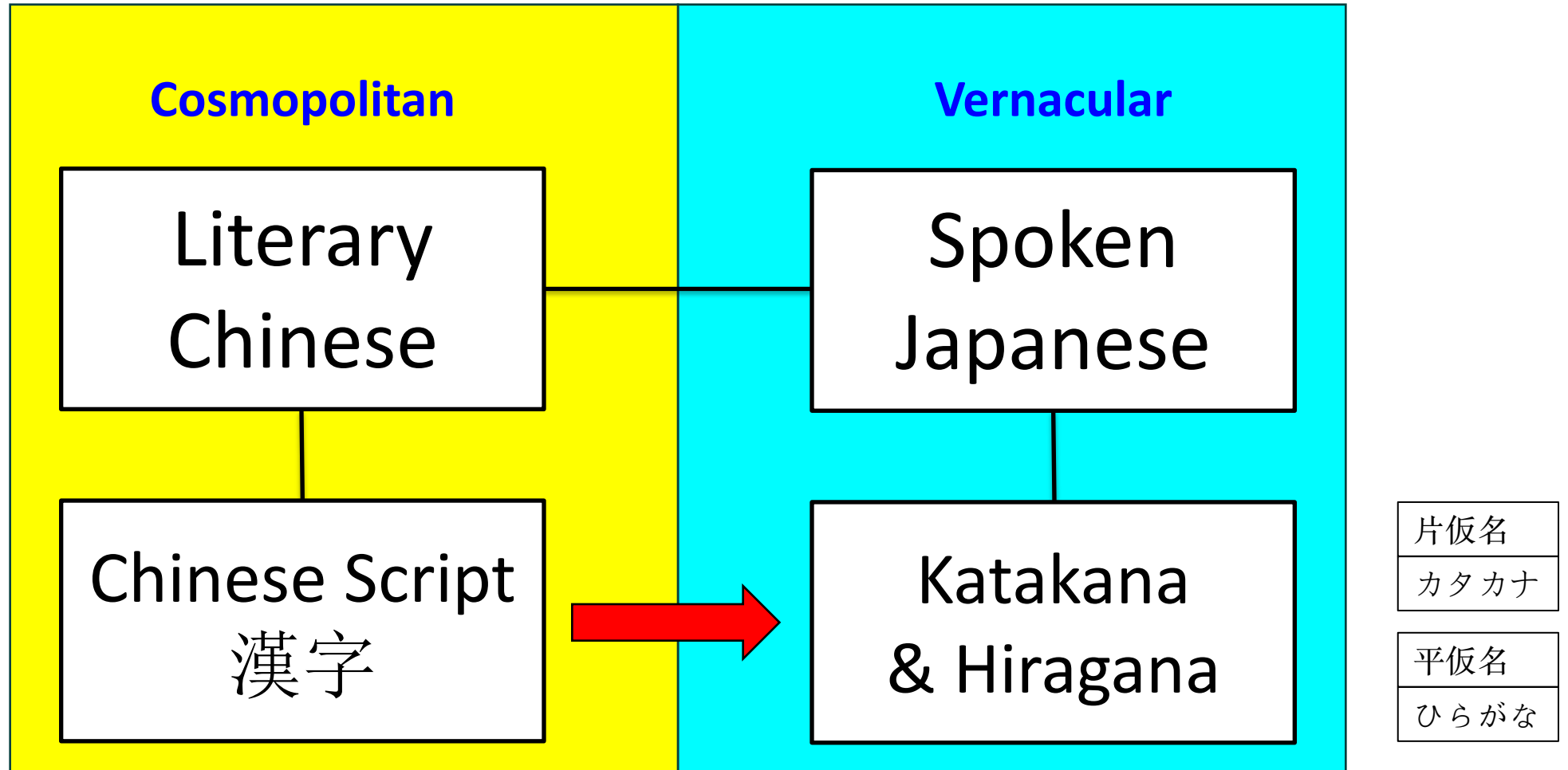
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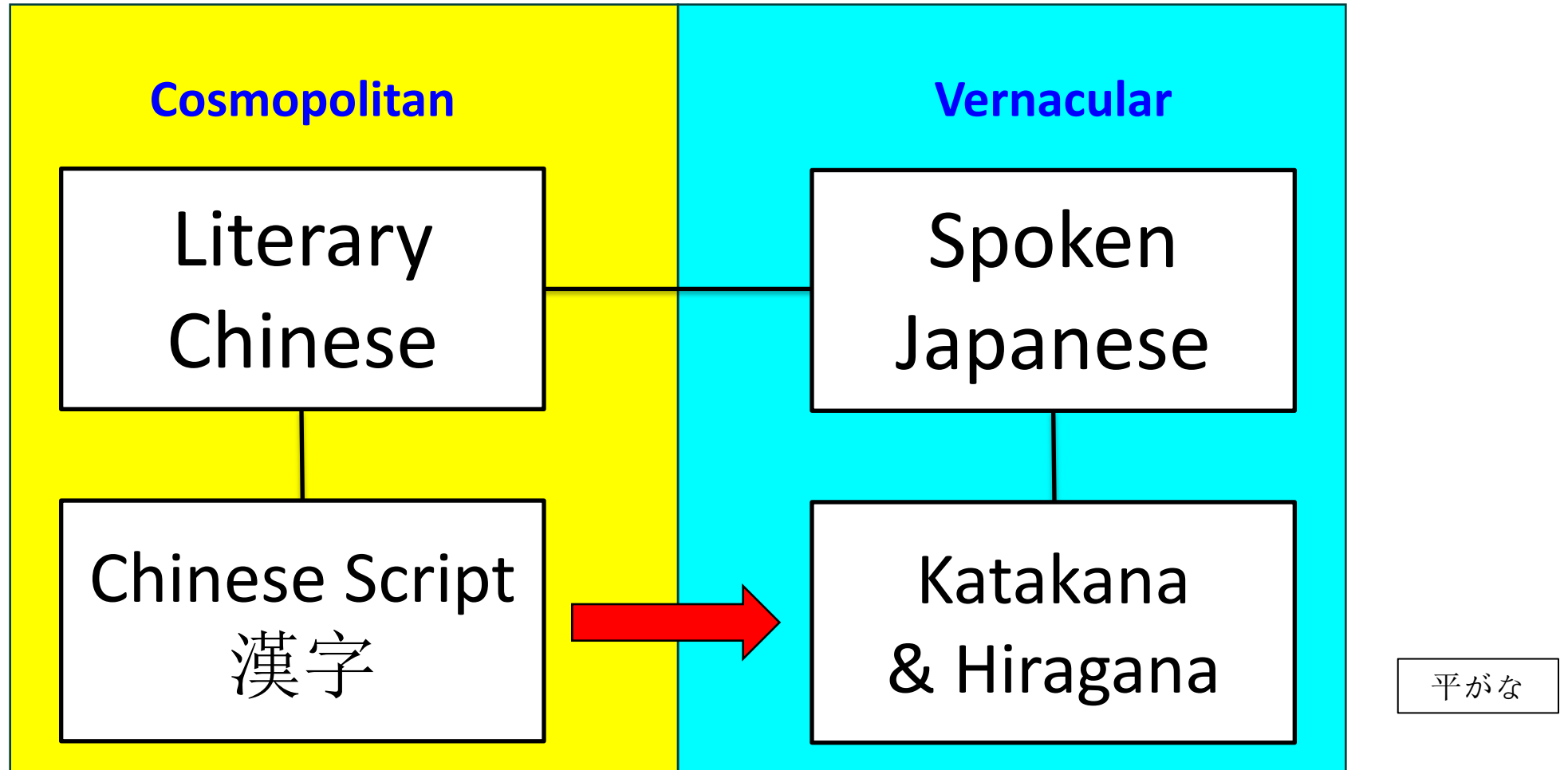
Chinese Script
漢字

Vernacular

THE JAPANESE CASE



THE JAPANESE CASE



MIXED SCRIPTS AND LITERARY LANGUAGE

- Literacy in Vietnam, Korea, and many other parts of Eastern Asia began with the Chinese script and language
- Therefore, the development of vernacular writing proceeded through a stage of hybridization with Chinese
- This was reinforced by the sustained importance of Literary Chinese textual culture across Eastern Asia
- Institutions like the Civil Service Examination reinforced the importance of literacy in Chinese script, language, and classical corpus of literature in many societies across Eastern Asia



A Sinographic **Cosmopolis**