

Bavarian dialects. A short overview

Lars Bülow, BayLat Workshop, 21 July 2026



INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Dialectology at LMU Munich

- Johann Andreas Schmeller as the first dialectologist
- from 1824: extraordinary member of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences
- from 1846: Chair of Old German Language and Literature at LMU



(Schmeller 1785–1852)

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Andreas_Schmeller#/media/Datei:Johann_Andreas_Schmeller.jpg

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Dialectology at LMU Munich

Modern variationist sociolinguistics

trad. dialectology
(since 1815)

Labovian sociolinguistics
(since 1950s)

Dialects in the Germanic tradition

- In the Germanic tradition the term dialect is not used synonymously with variety; instead, dialects are a specific form of variety
- Dialects can be defined as varieties that are maximally distant from the standard language, display a certain historical depth, are distributed locally or within small regions, and are used in specific communicative situations, such as informal conversations among local residents (cf. Schmidt & Herrgen 2011: 59)
- Dialects are linguistic systems in their own right as they are characterized by independent prosodic-phonological, lexical, and morphosyntactic structures

WHO SPEAKS A DIALECT

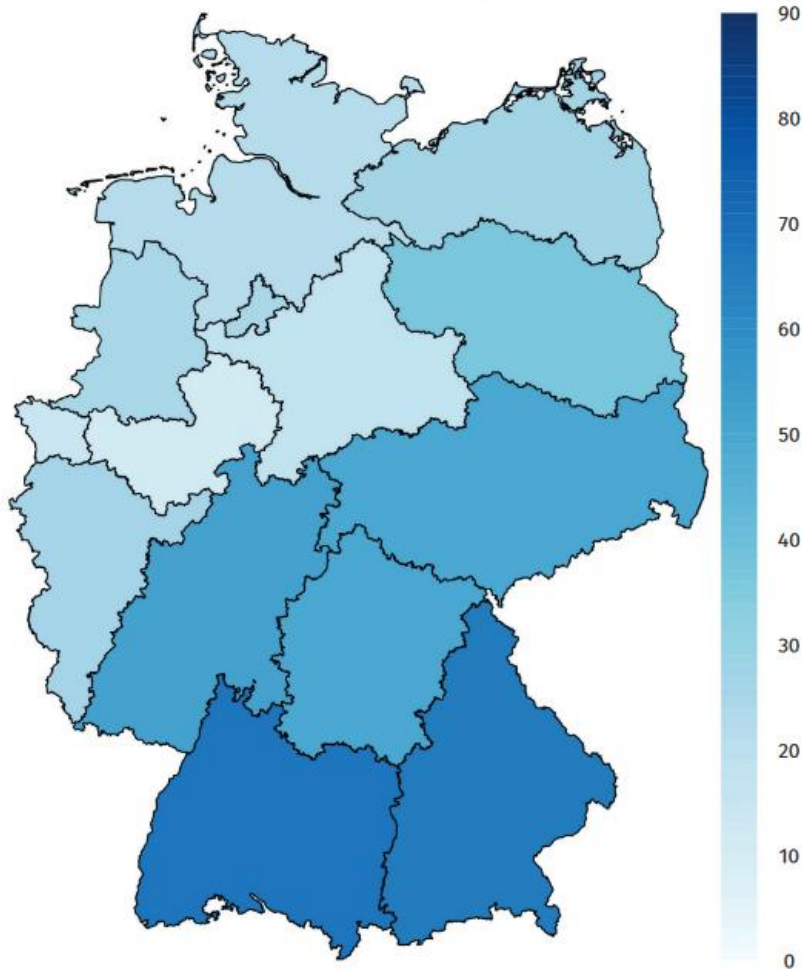


Abbildung 3: Dialektkompetenz (binär, nach Sprachräumen)

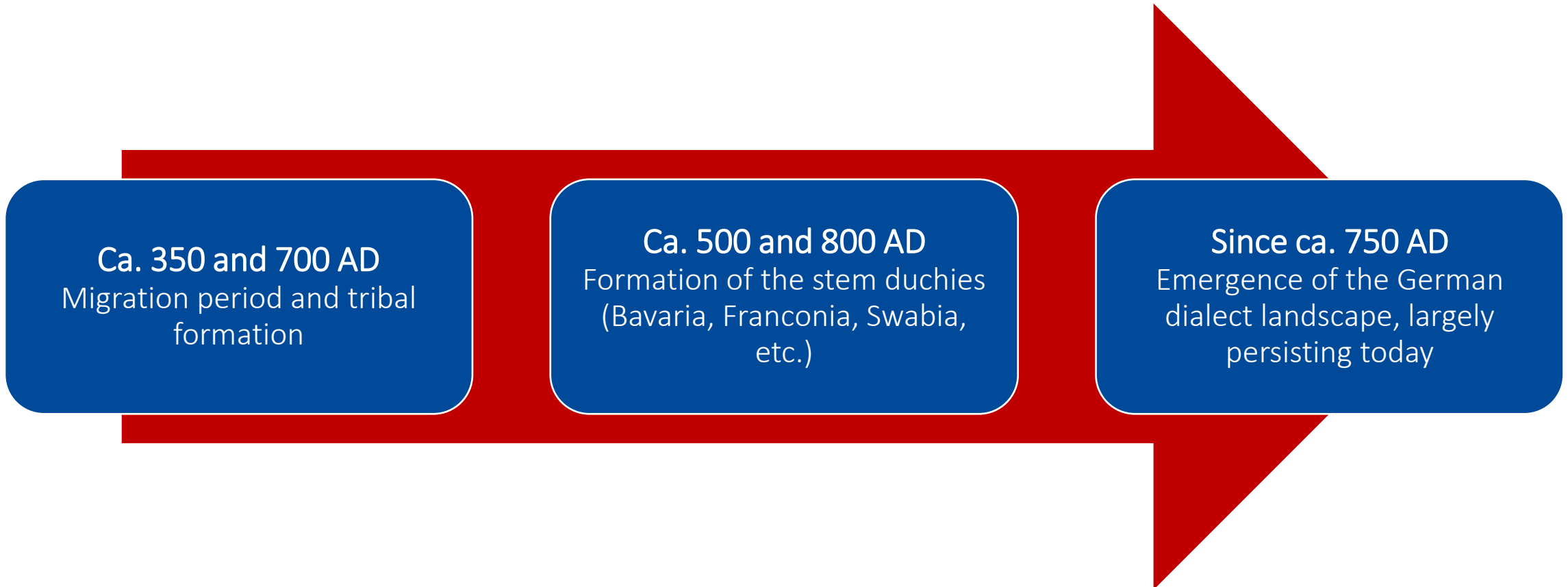
(Adler et al. 2024: 14)

“While for the period of the major dialectological surveys for the *Sprachatlas des Deutschen Reichs* from the 1870s onwards one can assume virtually comprehensive dialect competence, people who describe themselves as dialect-competent are now in the minority across the entire survey area.” (Adler et al. 2024: 9; own translation)

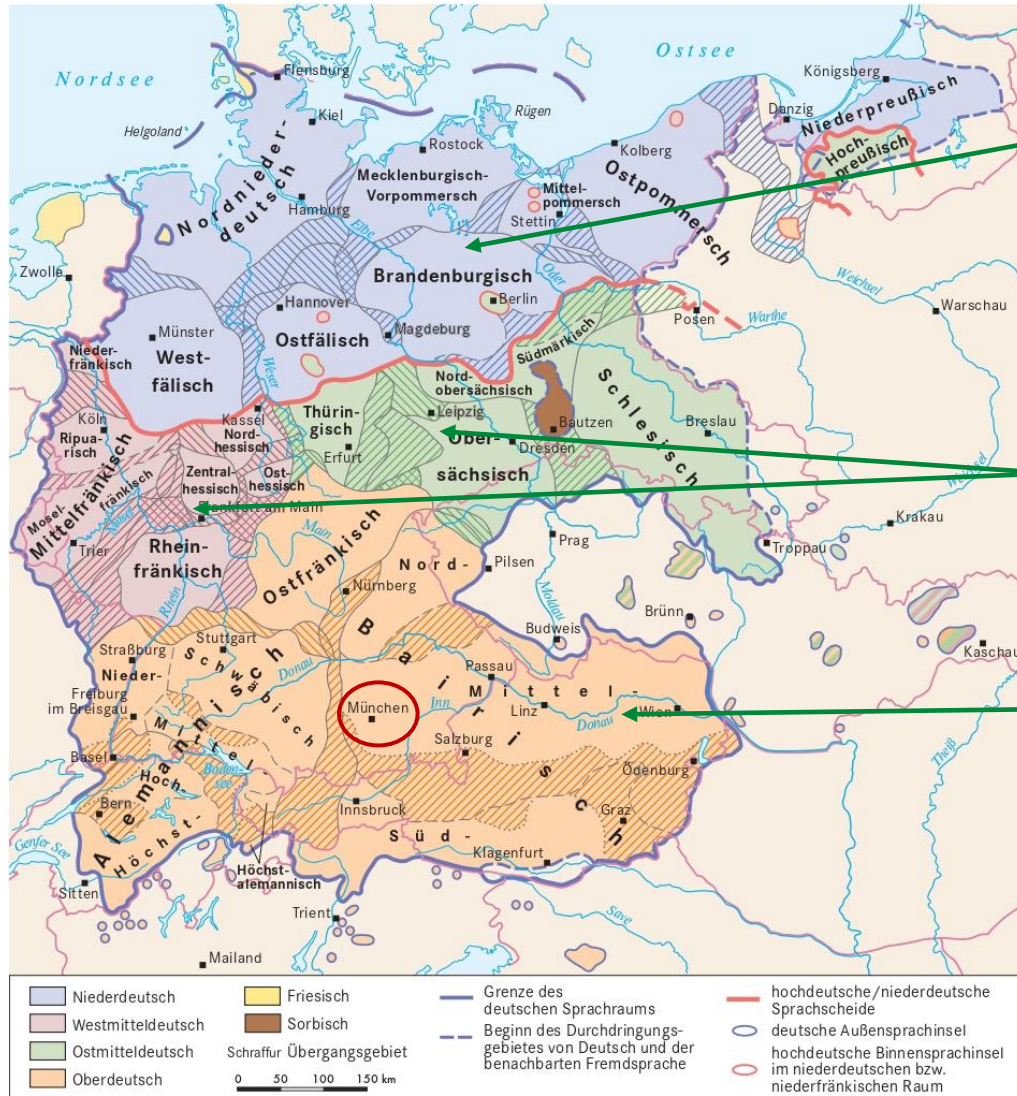
But: In Austria more than 80% of speakers speak a German dialect

In Switzerland almost every autochthonous Swiss German speaks a Swiss German dialect

THE EMERGENCE OF THE GERMAN DIALECT LANDSCAPE



GERMAN DIALECTS IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY



Low German dialects

Central German dialects

High German dialects

Upper German dialects

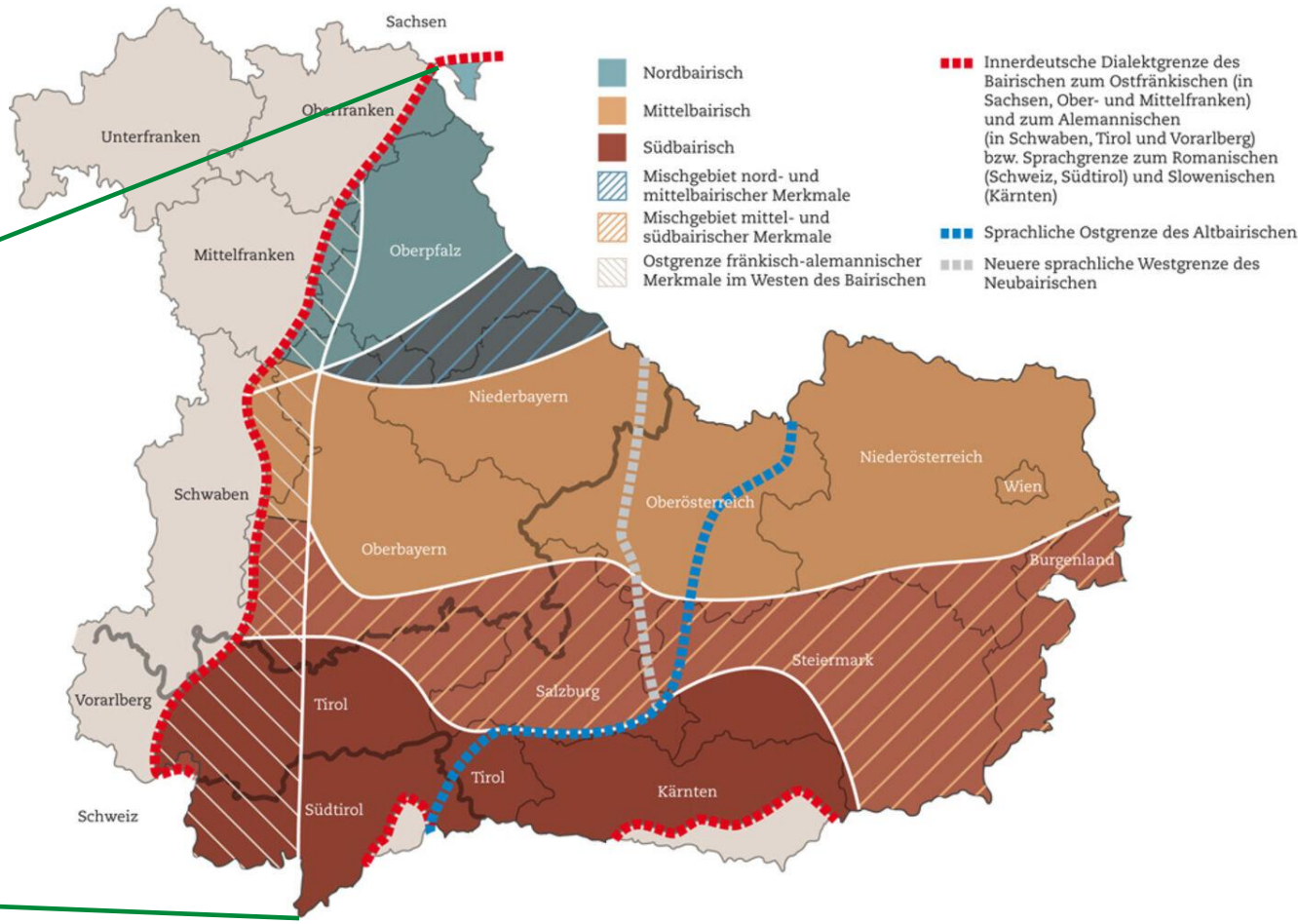
(Lameli 2011)

deutsche Mundarten: Gliederung der deutschen Mundarten in den ersten Jahrzehnten des 20. Jh.

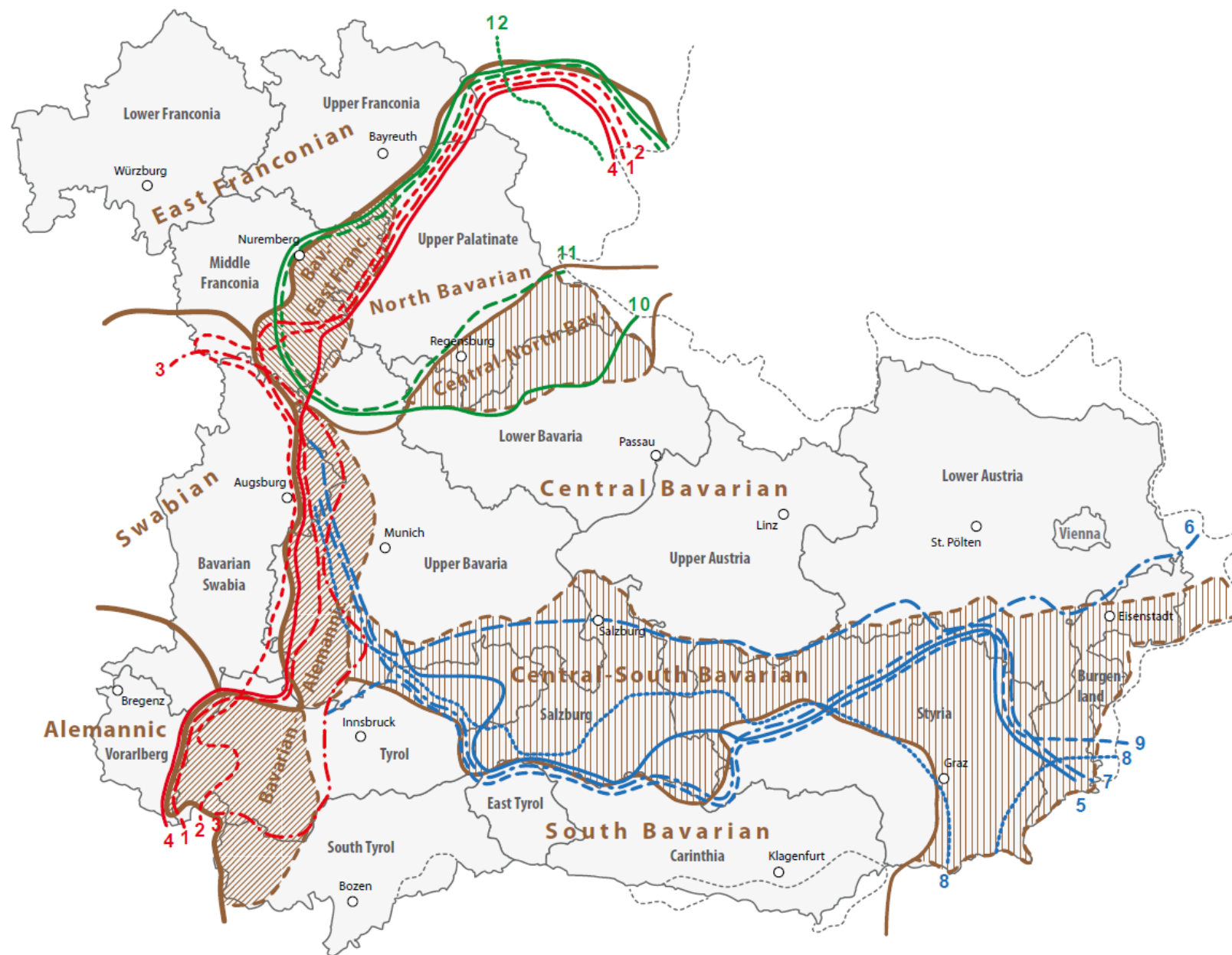
BAVARIAN DIALECTS IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY



(Lameli 2011)

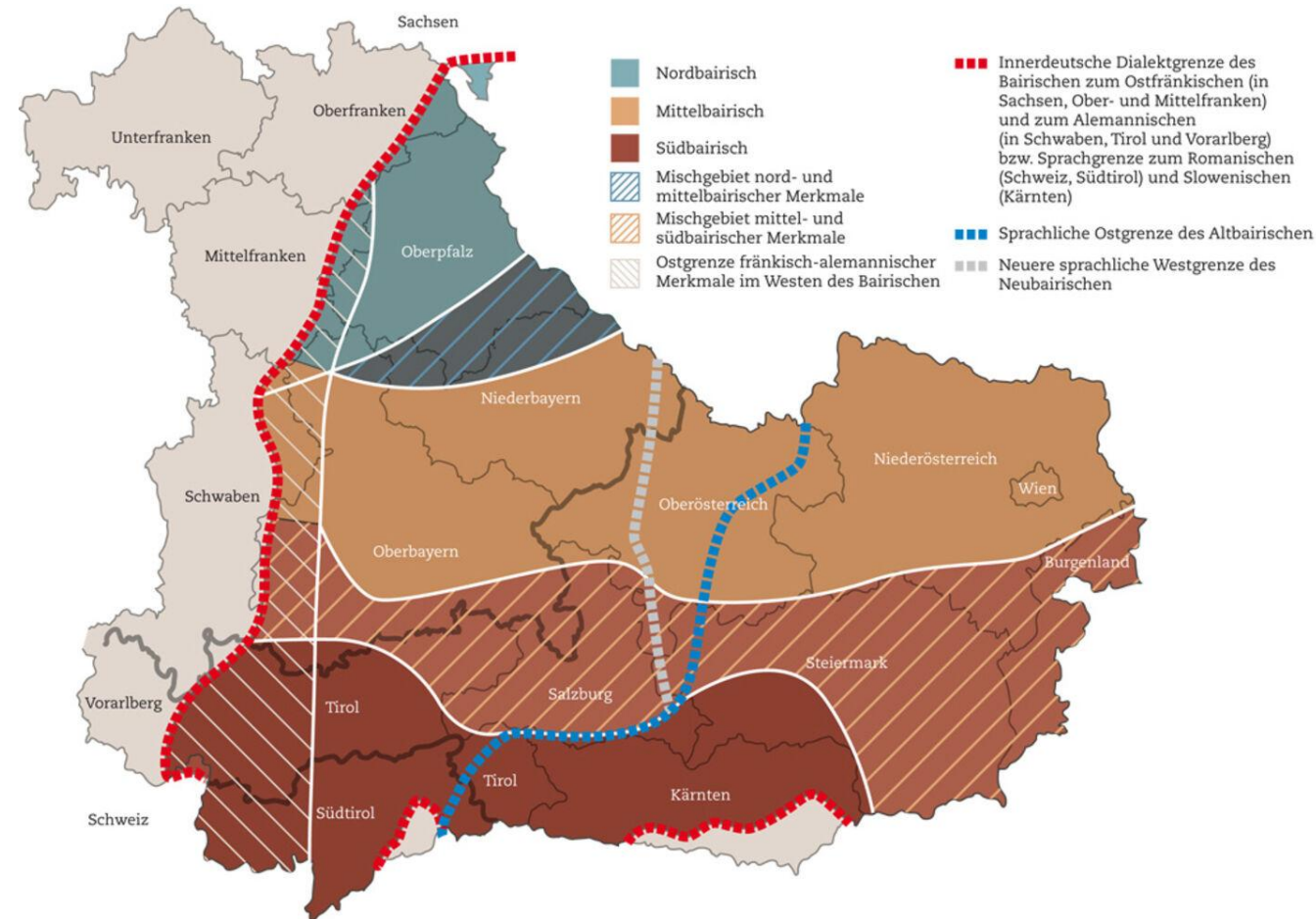


<https://www.stifterhaus.at/forschung/sprachforschung/dialekte-in-ooe/bairisch>



Bayerisch vs. Bairisch 'Bavarian vs. Bavarian'

- ➔ *Bairisch* refers to the linguistic-cultural unit, i. e. for example the Bavarian dialects in Germany, Austria, and South Tyrol (Italy)
- ➔ From North to the South: North Bavarian, West Central Bavarian, East Central Bavarian, South Bavarian



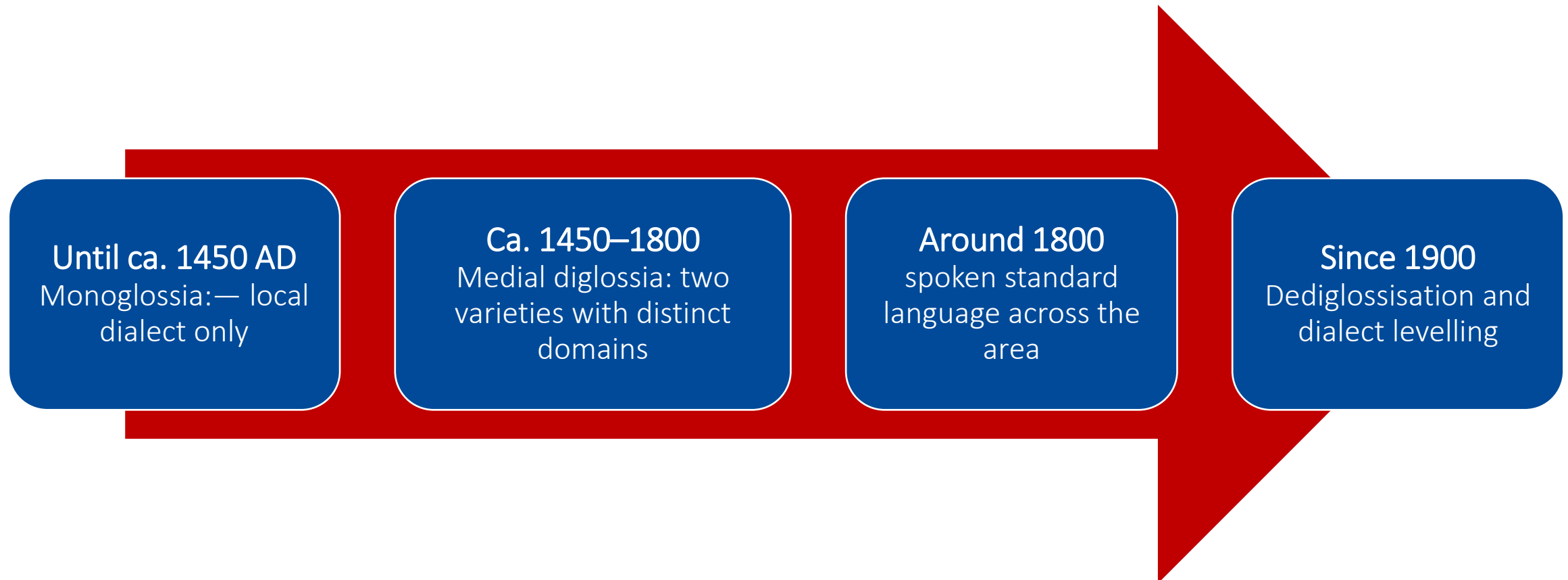
<https://www.stifterhaus.at/forschung/sprachforschung/dialekte-in-ooe/bairisch>

Bayerisch vs. *Bairisch* ‘Bavarian vs. Bavarian’

- *Bayerisch* refers to the political entity Bavaria
- We have several different dialects in Bavaria such as Bavarian, East Franconian, Swabian, or Rhine Franconian dialects



THE EMERGENCE OF THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION



LINGUISTIC SITUATIONS IN GERMAN SPEAKING REGIONS

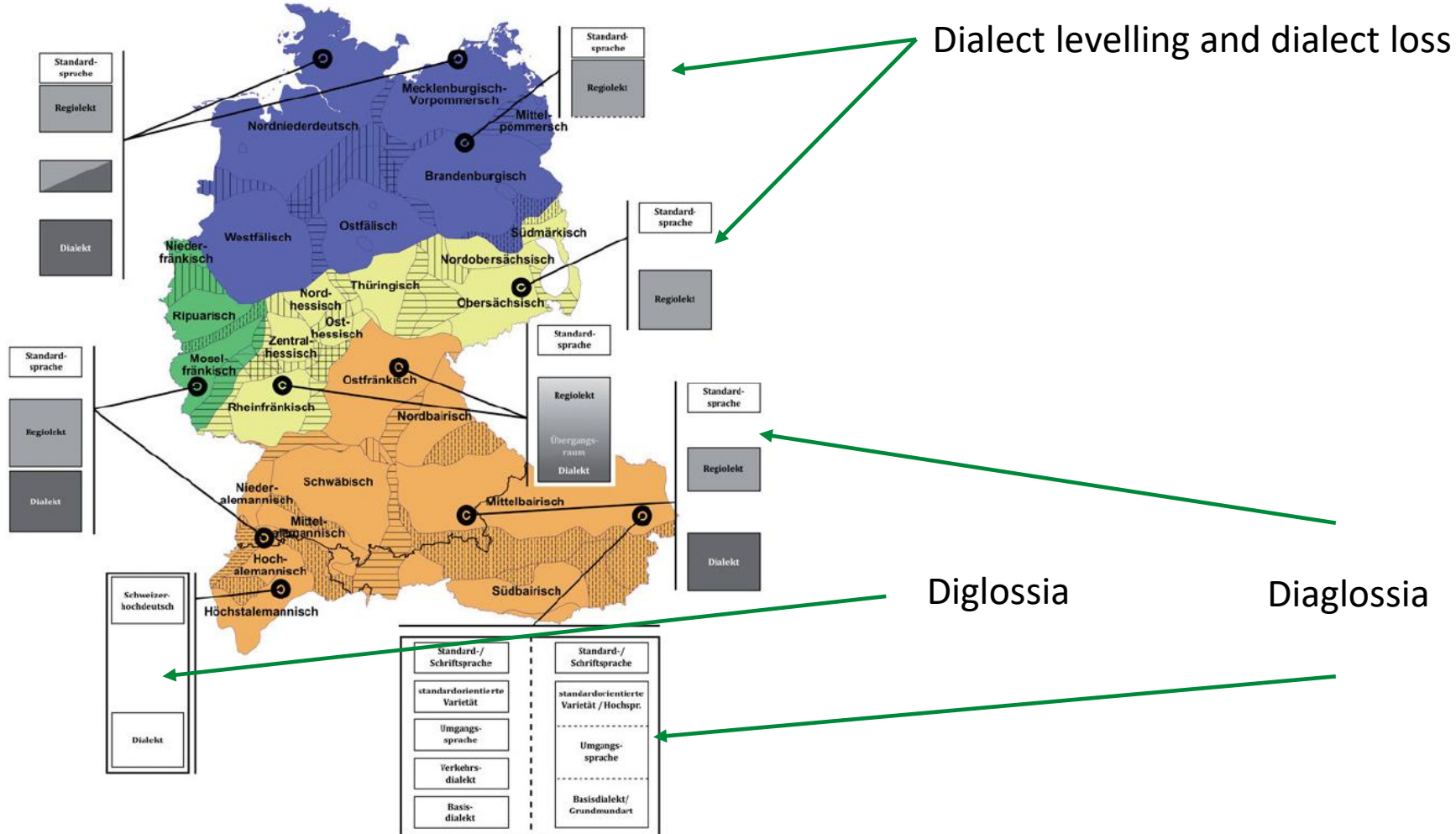
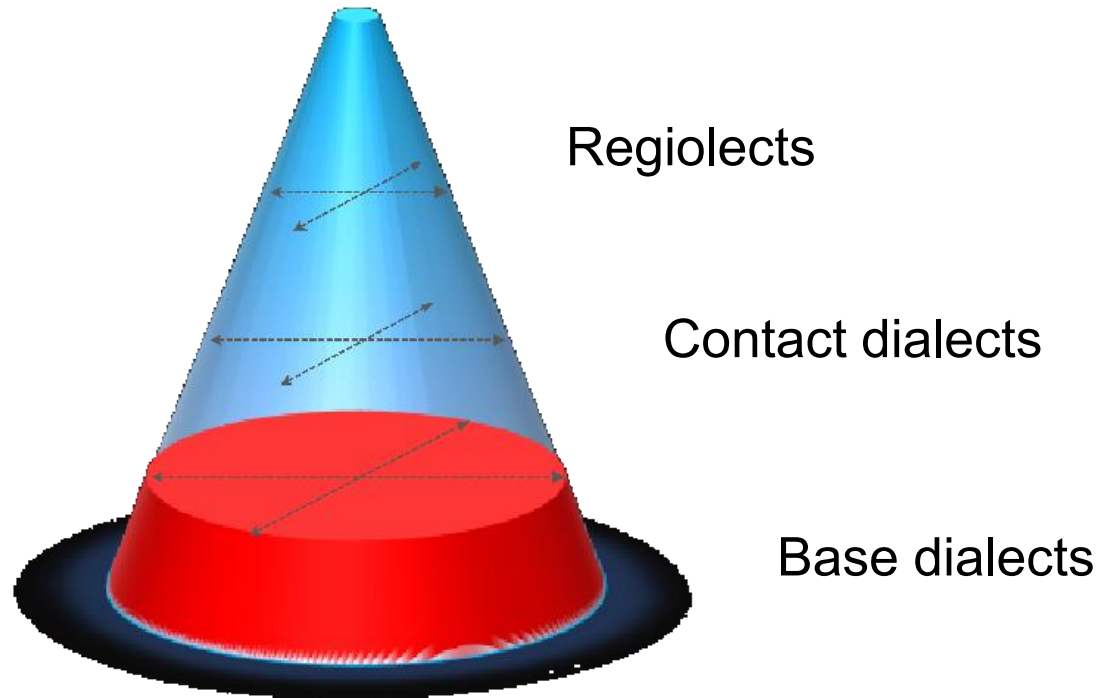


Abb. 5.2: Typen vertikaler Variationsspektren im deutschen Sprachraum

(after Kehrein 2019: 127)

DIAGLOSSIA IN THE BAVARIAN DIALECT REGION

Standard German



(based on Auer 2005: 21)

BAVARIAN DIALECT FEATURES

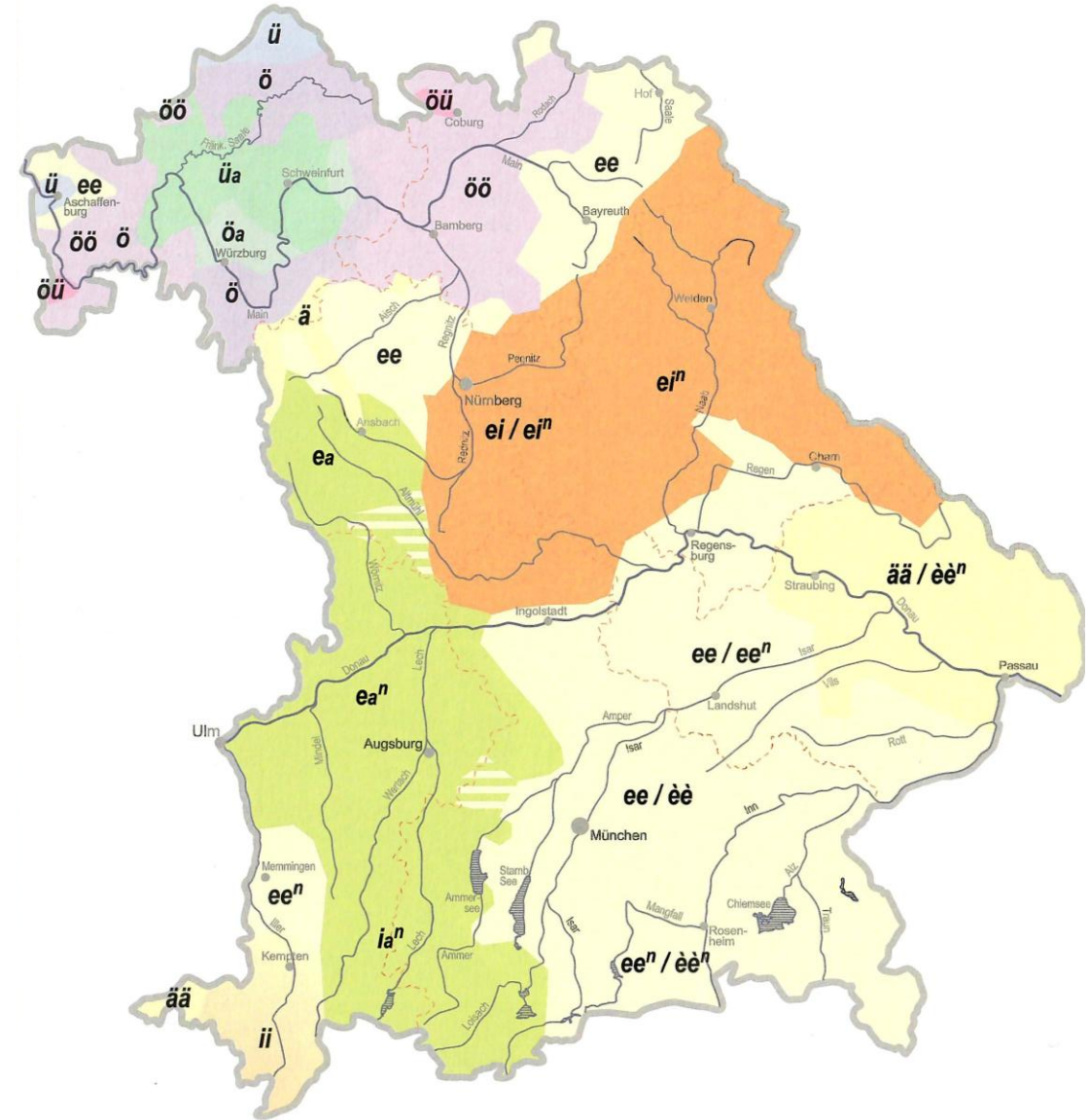
Bavarian differs from Standard German and from other German dialects across all linguistic levels, while naturally also sharing a number of structural features with them

Bavarian dialects are themselves internally differentiated (e.g., North Bavarian, Central Bavarian, South Bavarian) and display variation across regions and linguistic levels

BAVARIAN DIALECT FEATURES

Phonological level, e.g.: lenis-fortis contrast, /- and *r*-vocalization, unrounding of MHG rounded umlaute, inverted diphthongs etc.

General trends depending on the individual feature: convergence toward the standard, areal levelling, stability

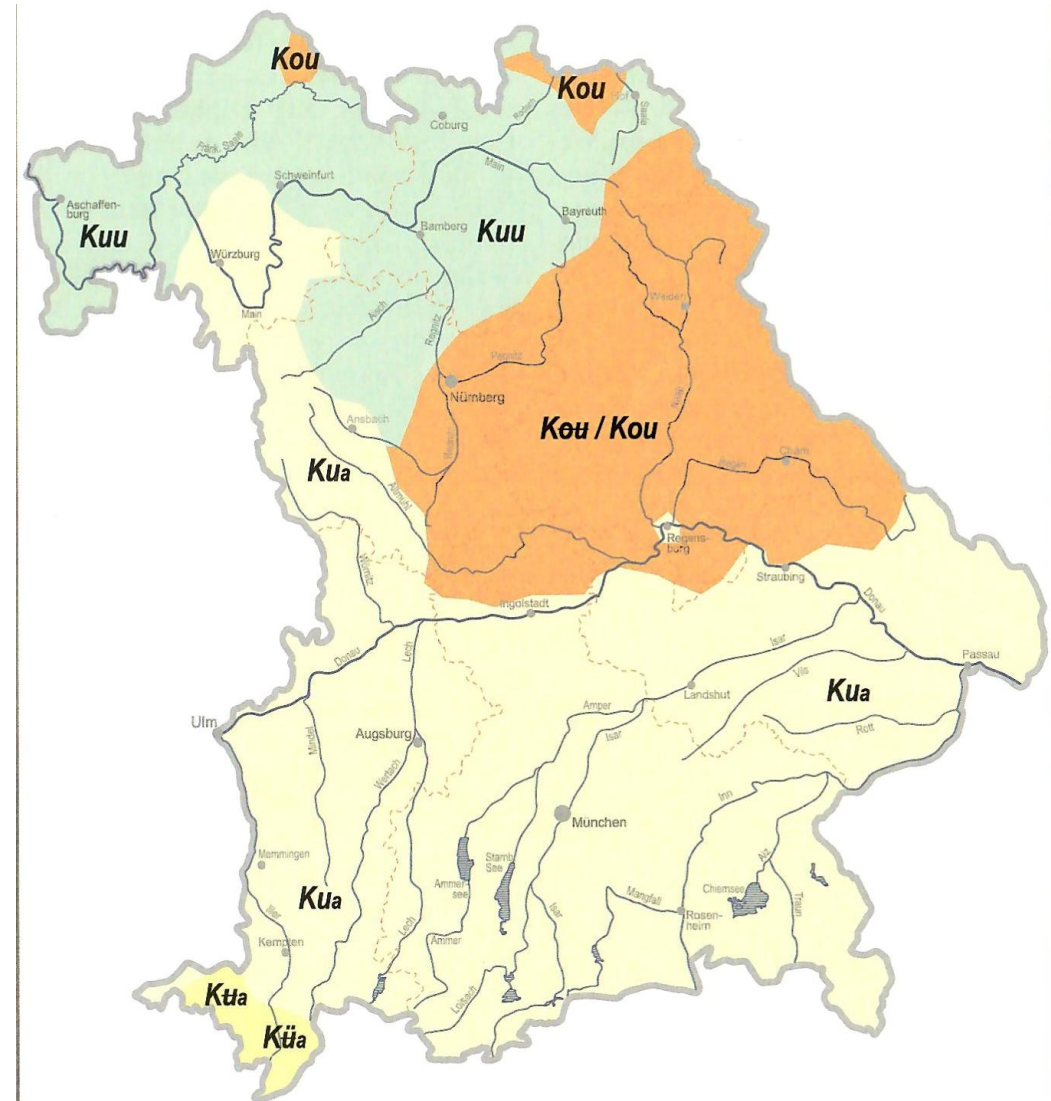


(KBSA 2006: MHG oe in *schön* ‚beautiful‘)

BAVARIAN DIALECT FEATURES

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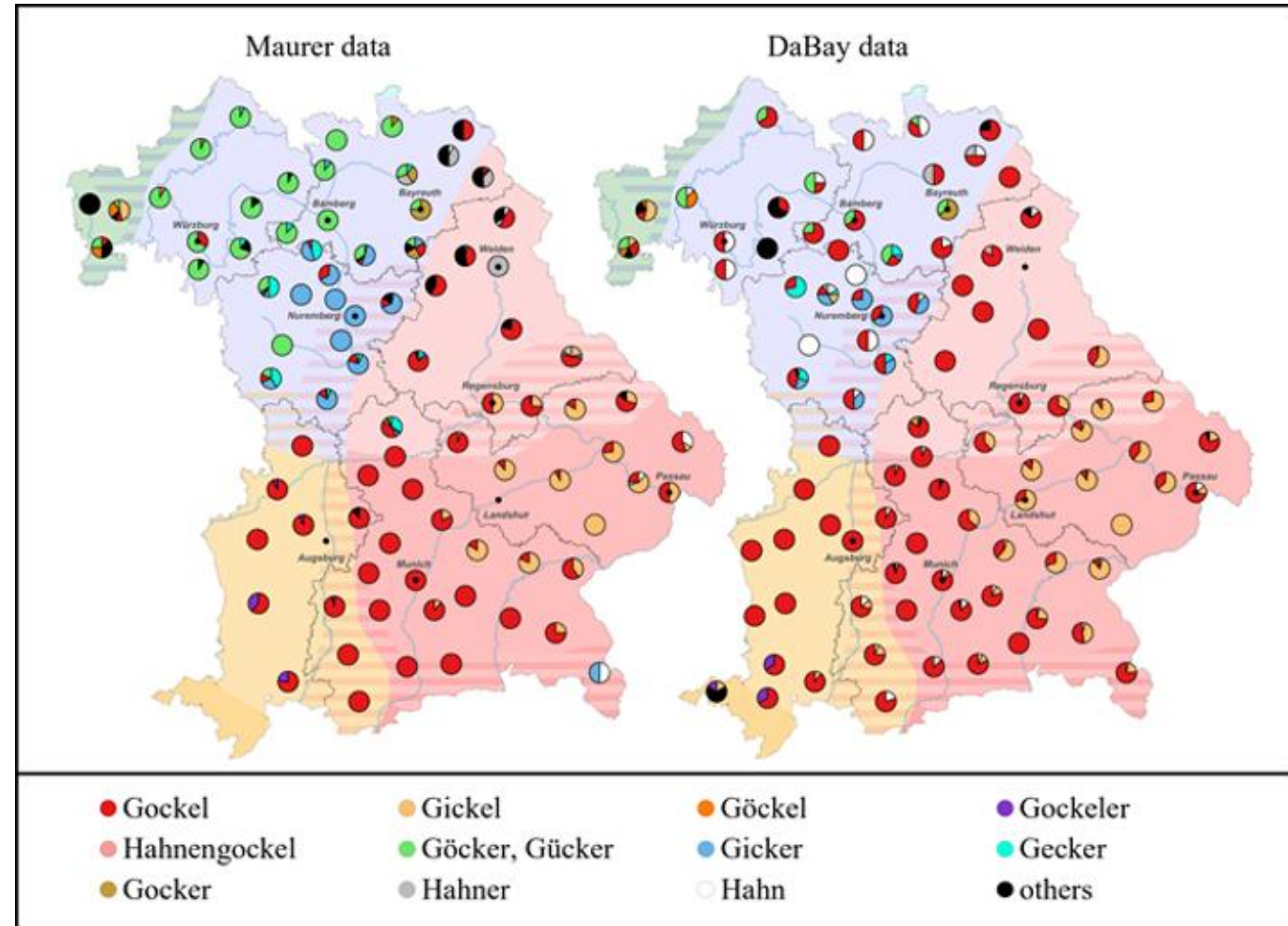
(KBSA 2006: MHG *uo* in *Kuh* ,cow')

BAVARIAN DIALECT FEATURES



Lexical level: fine grained lexical variation, e.g. for variants of the concept 'rooster'

General trends depending on the individual feature: convergence toward the standard, areal levelling, stability



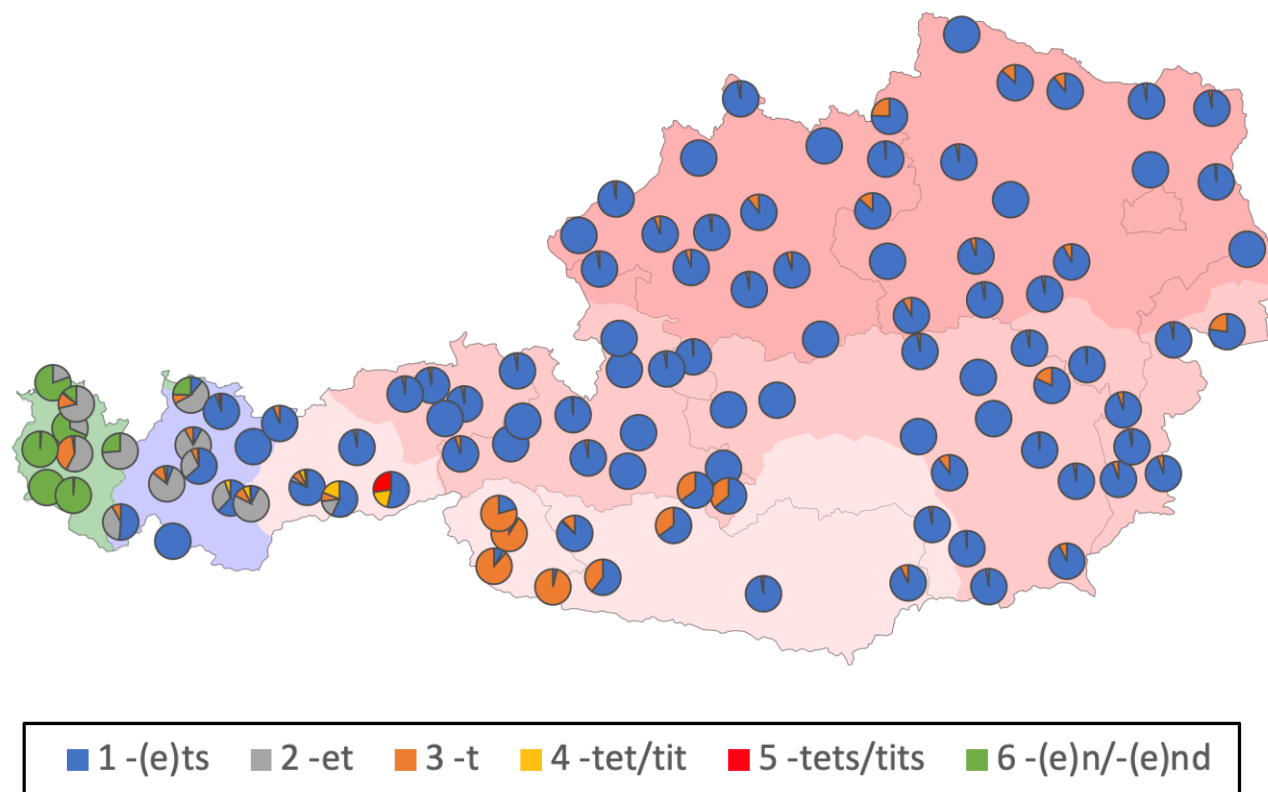
(Bülow et al. 2026: variants for ,rooster')

BAVARIAN DIALECT FEATURES

Morphological level: differences in verbal plural morphology; almost no Genitive; specific subjunctive II formation etc.

General trends depending on the individual feature: convergence toward the standard, areal levelling, stability

ihr nehmt, nehmet, nehmts etc. 'you take' 2PL

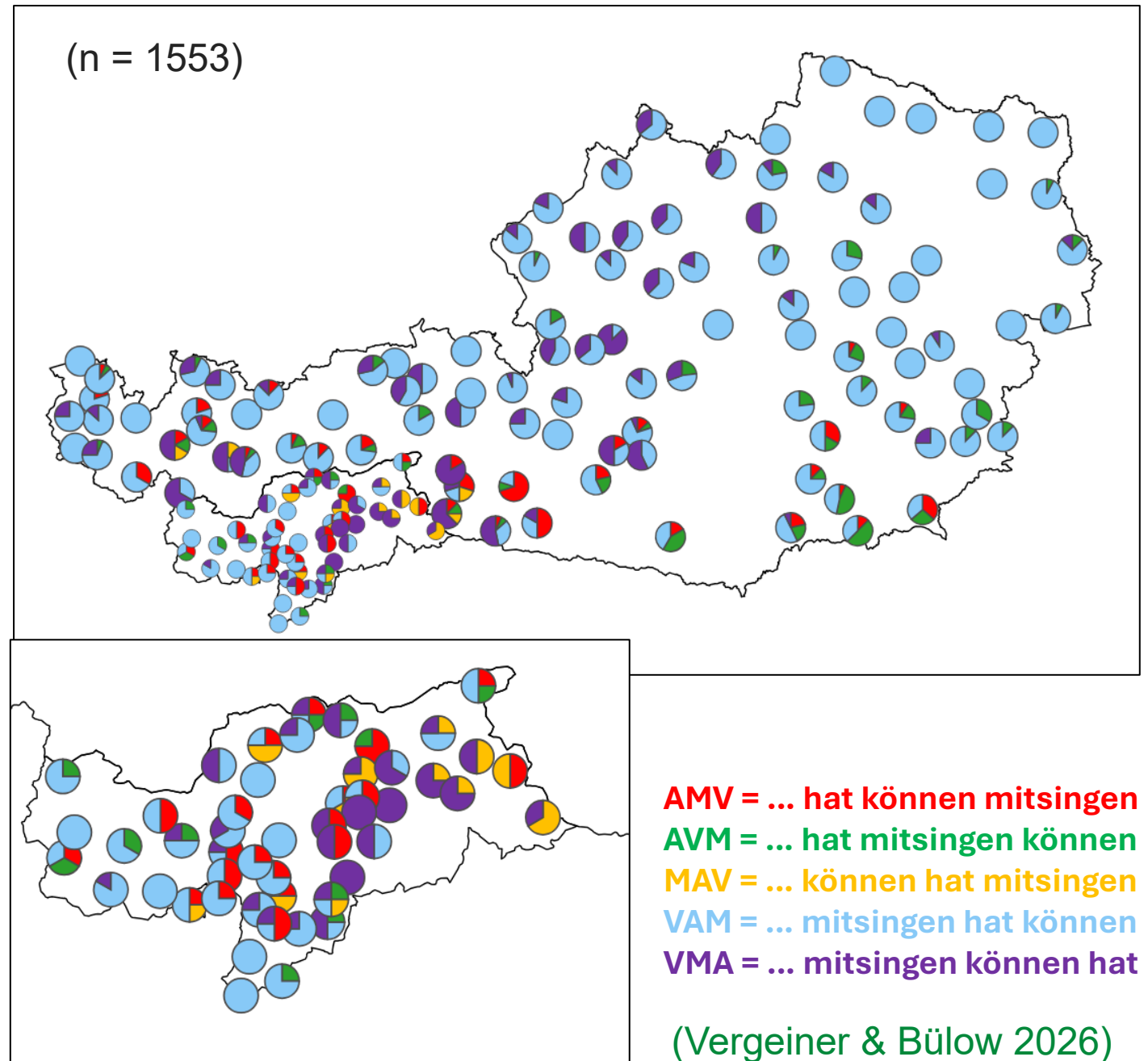


(Bülow 2026: variation 2PL)

BAVARIAN DIALECT FEATURES

Syntactic level: Negative concord, more strategies in relative clause formation, complementizer agreement, word order variation in three-verb clusters etc.

General trends depending on the individual feature: convergence toward the standard, areal levelling, stability



LANGUAGE VARIATION AND CHANGE

General trends: convergence toward the standard, areal levelling, stability

Geography and age are the strongest factors

INTRA-INDIVIDUAL VARIATION IN VERBAL MORPHOLOGY

Adopting a **variationist perspective** a central goal is to understand which factors condition variation and change in **plural verb morphology** – and in particular, how variation unfolds within individual speakers.

INTRA-INDIVIDUAL VARIATION IN VERBAL MORPHOLOGY

BACKGROUND

In German, we see a lot of variation in plural verb morphology

(Schirmunski 1962 [2010]; Rabanus 2005, 2008; Bülow et al. 2019)

Plural paradigms	Variety	‘nehmen’ ('to take')	PS/PL	Morpheme	Label
Three-form plural	MHG	<i>nēm-en</i>	1PL	-en	A
		<i>nēm-et</i>	2PL	-et	B
		<i>nēm-ent</i>	3PL	-ent	C
Two-form plural	Standard German	<i>nehm-en</i>	1PL	-en	A
		<i>nehm-t</i>	2PL	-t	B
		<i>nehm-en</i>	3PL	-en	A
	Central Bavarian regiolect	<i>nem-en</i>	1PL	-en	A
		<i>nem-ts</i>	2PL	-ts	D
		<i>nem-en</i>	3PL	-en	A
One-form plural	East Alemannic	<i>nem-et</i>	1PL	-et	B
		<i>nem-et</i>	2PL	-et	B
		<i>nem-et</i>	3PL	-et	B

INTRA-INDIVIDUAL VARIATION IN VERBAL MORPHOLOGY

BACKGROUND

Variation is even more pronounced within the Bavarian dialects (cf. Wiesinger 1989; Mauser 1998, 2007, 2022; Bülow et al. 2019)

So far, research has not identified any linguistic factors contributing to variation...

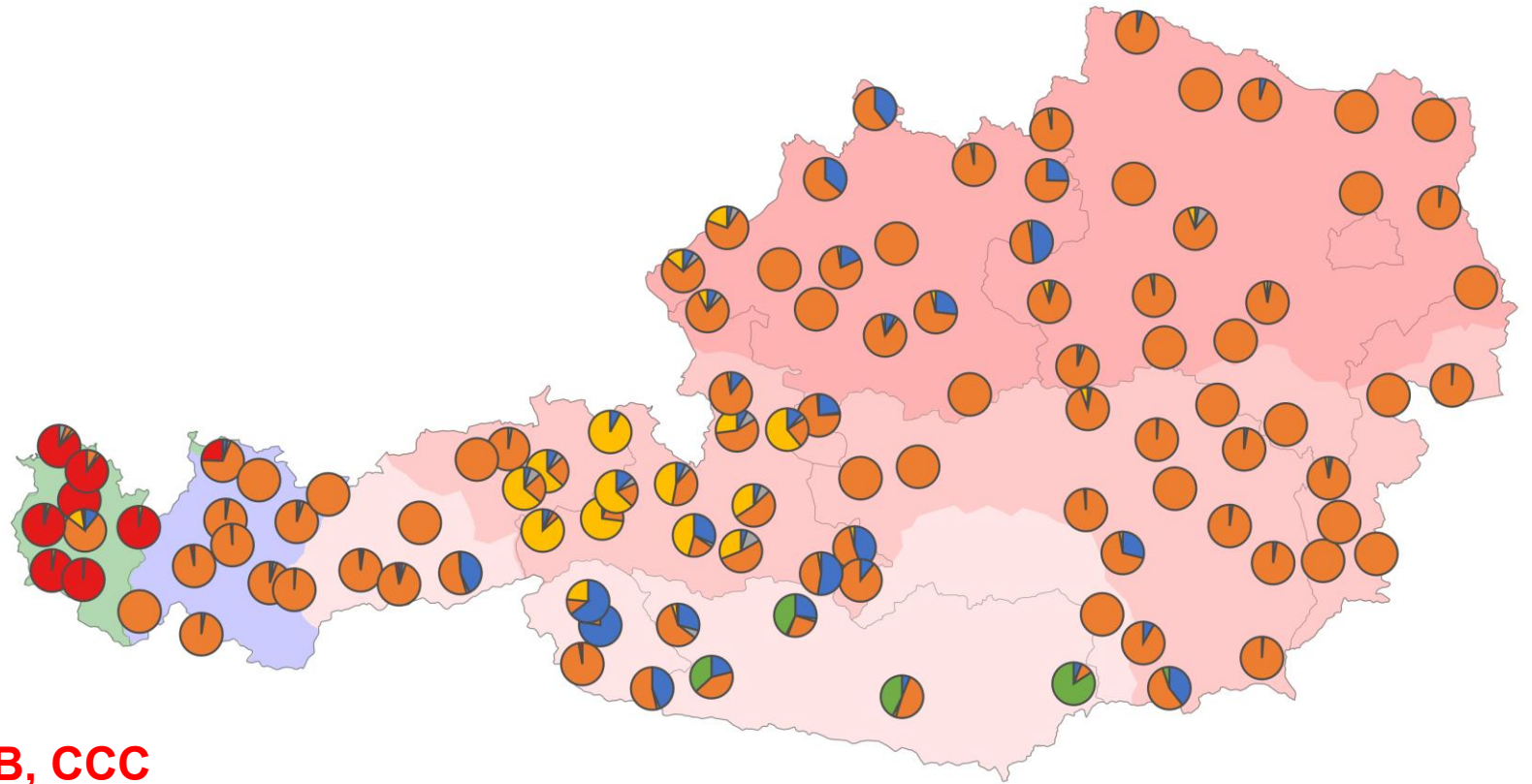
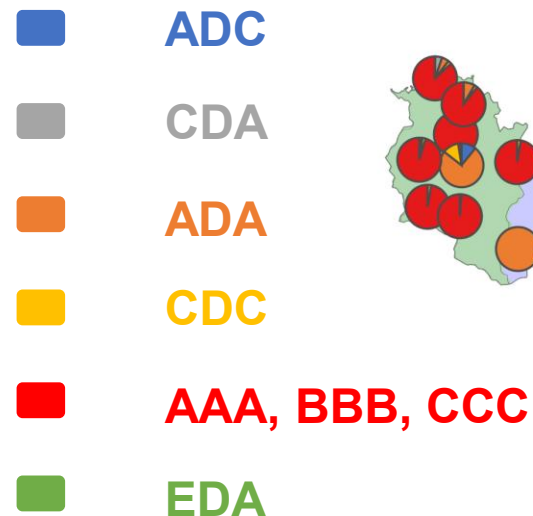
Instead, social and geographical factors play a role. However, these factors can only account for a small part of the variation.

Variant	Type	Code	Examples
Variant 1	Three-form plural	ADC	<i>gehn – gehdds – gehnd liegen – liegts – liegenk</i>
Variant 2	Three-form plural	CDA	<i>gehnd – gehdds – gehen liegenk – liegts – liegen</i>
Variant 3	Two-form plural	ADA	<i>gehn – gehdds – gehen liegen – liegts – liegen</i>
Variant 4	Two-form plural	CDC	<i>gehnd – gehdds – gehnd liegenk – liegts – liegenk</i>
Variant 5	One-form plural	BBB, AAA	<i>lieget – lieget – lieget gehn – gehn – gehn</i>
Variant 6	-ma plural	EDA	<i>gehma – gehdds – gehen</i>

INTRA-INDIVIDUAL VARIATION IN VERBAL MORPHOLOGY

BACKGROUND – INTER-INDIVIDUAL VARIATION

Geographical variation and age group are significant factors
(293 speakers, 105 locations, 22 verbs, 5.751 tokens)



INTRA-INDIVIDUAL VARIATION IN VERBAL MORPHOLOGY

BACKGROUND – INTRA-INDIVIDUAL VARIATION (IAV)

55% of speakers use more than one variant. Older speakers show more IAV ($\chi^2(3, N=293) = 14.49, p < 0.01$, Cramér's $V = 0.22$).

No. used variants	No. of speakers	Age group	1 variant	2 variants	3 variants	≥4 variants
1 variant	131	old (65+)	50	50	27	19
2 variants	88	young (18-35)	81	38	20	8
3 variants	47					
4 variants	26					
5 variants	1					
6 variants	0					

INTRA-INDIVIDUAL VARIATION IN VERBAL MORPHOLOGY

NEW APPROACH TO INTRA-INDIVIDUAL VARIATION (IAV)

Measure of IAV: **Shannon entropy** per speaker:

- the closer to 0, the more predictable = the lower the IAV
- the closer to 1, the less predictable = the higher the IAV

speaker	location	age	gender	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	Shannon-Entropy
FO_MA	FO	A	M	0	0	14	5	1	0	0,41636876
FO_MJ	FO	J	M	6	0	15	0	0	0	0,33390061
FO_WA	FO	A	W	3	0	13	4	1	0	0,57803292
FO_WJ	FO	J	W	0	0	20	1	0	0	0,10684698

Results

GAMM: Shannon ~ age group * gender + s(Long, Lat) (N=293, Adjusted R² = 0.443)

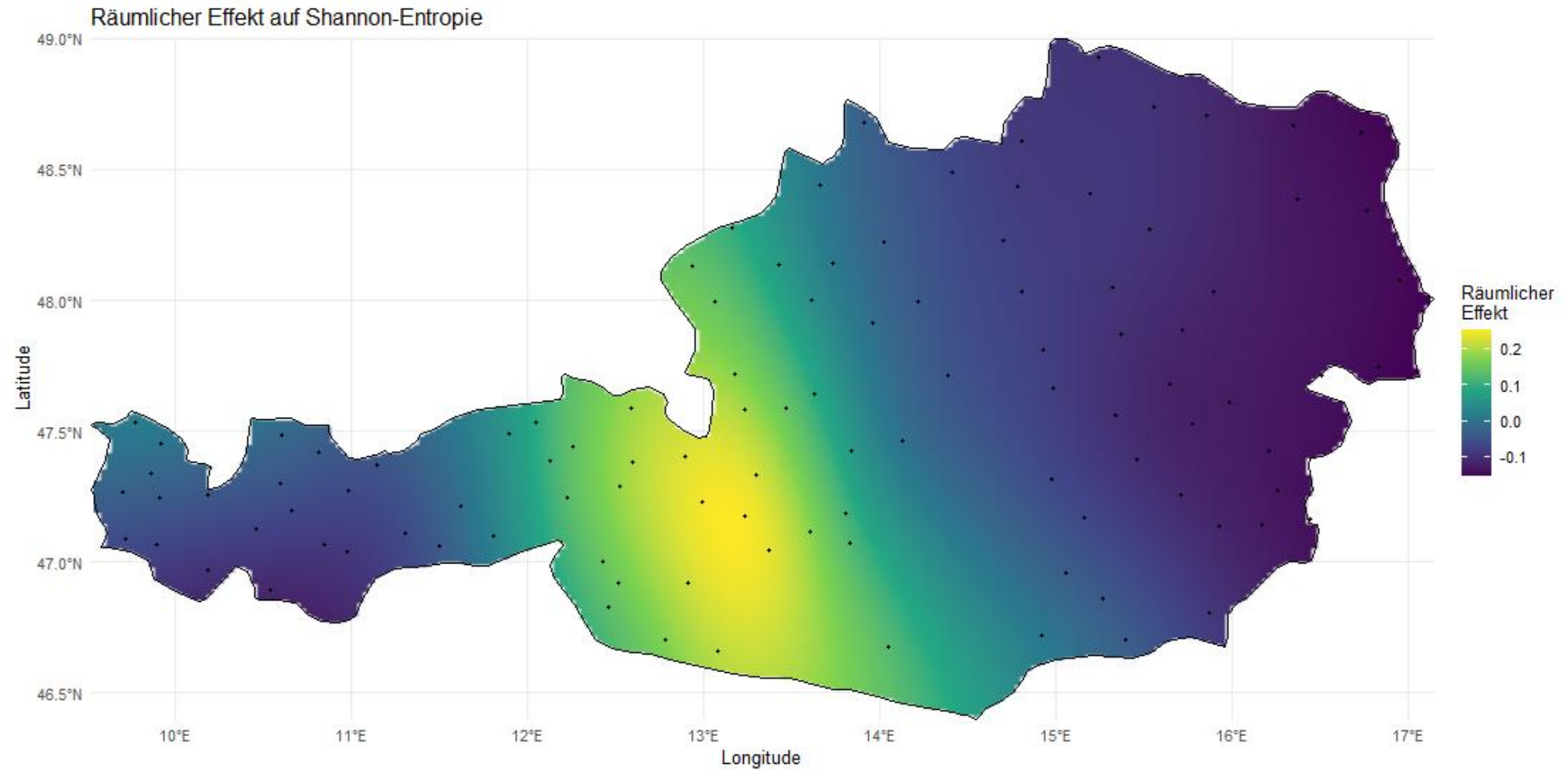
Parametric effects

Effect	Estimate	Std. Error	t-Wert	p-Wert	Signifikanz
(Intercept)	0.12608	0.01611	7.826	< 0.001	***
Age group (A vs. J)	0.09698	0.02072	4.681	< 0.001	***
gender (W vs. M)	-0.00813	0.02272	-0.358	0.721	
Age group × gender	-0.04888	0.03216	-1.520	0.130	

Non-parametric effects

Term	edf	F-Wert	p-Wert	Signifikanz
s(Long, Lat)	13.86	9.63	< 0.001	***

Results – Geographical effects intra-individual variation



WHY VARIATION WITHIN THE INDIVIDUAL

- It reveals the fundamental mechanisms of language change → language change originates in individual usage patterns and trajectories, not just at the community level
- It links cognition and social structure → intra-individual variation reflects the interaction of social meaning, stylistic choices, and cognitive processes
- It challenges the notion of the “average speaker” → linguistic systems are not homogeneous; they are shaped by structured individual differences and speaker-specific variability
- It helps us to better understand dynamics between the individual and community level regarding language change → entrenchment and conventionalization (Schmid 2020)



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Conceptual preliminaries

State of research

- Reasons for the reluctance to investigate dialect morphosyntax are partly methodological:
- “Dialect syntax is differentiated on a rather large scale and, unlike morphology, semantics, and partly phonology, cannot be investigated by direct questioning or by means of questionnaires” (König 2000: 163).

BAVARIAN DIALECTS TODAY

