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Languages, Geography of

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Language (in contrast to speech) may be understood in several ways: (a) as a means of organizing thought, (b) as a way of communicating for producing and sharing meaning, and (c) as a vehicle for bringing the world into consciousness. Thus, language is simultaneously a psychological, social, and cultural phenomenon. In many countries (e.g., Belgium, Canada), languages have deep political significance. Because languages are unevenly distributed across space, they are also inherently geographic as well.

Because languages are semantically and historically related to one another, it is common to group them into families of varying sizes. Linguists and cultural geographers typically maintain that there are roughly eight major language families as well as several others termed *isolates.*

By far the largest and most widespread of the major language families is the Indo-European, a group first identified by linguist William Jones during the 18th century. Starting with the migrations of the so-called Aryans circa 1500–2000 BC, perhaps as a result of their domestication of the horse, Indo-Europeans moved in two directions from their home-land near the Caucuses Mountains. One group moved east into northern India, becoming the basis of the Sanskrit-based Indic languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Gujarati, Bihari, Marathi, and Nepali. Others remained in the Middle East, where they eventually became the Iranic family, including Farsi (formerly Persian), Kurdish, Armenian, and (in Afghanistan) Pashto. The other major branch of Indo-Europeans moved into Europe, where they diverged into several groups. These include the Latin-based Romance languages (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, French, Romansch, and Romanian) that arose during the disintegration of the Roman Empire. Greek and Albanian form separate categories in their own right. Farther north, the Germanic languages include German, Dutch, the Scandinavian tongues, and English. Celtic, an early branch once widespread throughout Western Europe, today consists of Scottish and Irish Gaelic, Welsh, Breton in western France, and extinct tongues such as Cornish; this branch is in danger of disappearing. In Eastern Europe and Russia, the Slavic branch includes Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian, and Bulgarian. The Baltic group of Lithuanian and Latvian is another.

With the expansion of Spanish, Portuguese, French, and British colonialism, Indo-European languages were carried throughout much of the world, becoming dominant throughout the New World, Australia, and New Zealand (Figure 1). Today roughly half of the world speaks an Indo-European tongue of one sort or another. English in particular, riding the heels of the British and American empires, has become the *lingua franca* spoken by more people than any other tongue (when second-language speakers are included). English is unquestionably the world's dominant language in commerce, trade, scholarly publications, airlines, international finance, and tourism.

A second major language family is Afro-Asiatic, which extends across the Middle East and North Africa (Figure 2). This group includes most of the extinct or nearly extinct languages of the ancient Middle East such as Canaanite, Phoenician, Assyrian, and Aramaic (of which pockets survive). The dominant branch of Afro-Asiatic is Semitic, which includes Arabic (with numerous dialects) and Hebrew, which was a nearly extinct language before it was revived by Zionists at the end of the 19th century. Other branches include Berber, widespread in the Mahgreb, and Kushitic, the dominant family of Ethiopia (i.e., Amharic) and Somalia.

Ural-Altaic, also sometimes called Finno-Ugric, comprises a third family. The origins of this group, probably near the Altai Mountains of Mongolia, are lost in prehistory. It is likely that speakers of this family are descendants of several waves of migration that generated populations that continue to speak loosely related tongues stretched across Eurasia (Figure 3). Finnish and Estonian are one example, and Hungarian, the language of the Magyar who settled in Eastern Europe during the 8th century, is another. A third branch is the Turkic languages, all of which emanated from the Turkish migrations into Central Asia and Anatolia during the 9th and 10th centuries; remaining Turkic languages include Turkish, Azerbaijani, Kazakh, Uzbek, Turkmen, Kyrghiz, and (in western China) Uighur. Yet another branch is Mongol and Manchu, which were formerly spoken in Manchuria but now are extinct, as are indigenous tongues of Siberia such as Samoyed and Tungic. Finally, many linguists assign Japanese and Korean to this family as well, although this is controversial.

Figure 1 Countries in Which Indo-European Languages Are Dominant

Figure 2 Countries in Which Afro-Asiatic Languages Are Dominant

Figure 3 Countries in Which Ural-Altaic Languages Are Dominant

Figure 4 Countries in Which Bantu or Niger-Kordofanian Languages Are Dominant

Africa south of the Sahara desert is a complex mosaic of tongues from several language families. In addition to Afro-Asiatic languages in the north (Arabic and Berber) and in the Horn of Africa (Amharic and Somali), it has smaller families such as Nilo-Saharan and (in southwest Africa) the famous click languages of the Khoisan family (e.g., !Kung). However, the bulk of the many languages spoken throughout this vast region fall under the Bantu or Niger-Kordofanian language family, which includes thousands of tongues (Figure 4). Arising from the migrations of agriculturalists from Central Africa around the time of Christ, this family includes languages as diverse as Mande in West Africa; Kikuyu in Kenya; and Tswana, Nbele, and Zulu in Southern Africa. Along the eastern part of the continent, Swahili, a trade language that combined words of different languages (including some from Arabic), has long formed a lingua franca.

In East Asia, the Sino-Tibetan language family is the most commonly spoken group (Figure 5). Common to this group is the use of tones (although these are found in some African languages as well), in which pitch is part of the meaning of the word. This family includes Chinese, which embraces a variety of languages that are not mutually intelligible but that use a common writing system (a feat made possible only with a pictographic writing system, not an alphabet). Chinese includes Mandarin, the dominant language of northern China (and the most commonly spoken language at home in the world) and close to a national tongue (Szechwanese is a dialect), as well as Cantonese and lesser-known ones such as Shanghainese, Wu, Hakka, and Fukienese or Taiwanese. This group also includes Tibetan and Burmese (the latter because of Tibetan migrations down the Irrawaddy River).

A sixth major family is Malayo-Polynesian, a diverse group that extends across much of Southeast Asia into the islands of Polynesia and Micronesia (Figure 6), thereby including Hawaiian and Maori (in New Zealand). Originating among tribes in Taiwan, this group includes the dominant Bahasa languages of Malaysia and Indonesia (each with countless dialects) and the numerous tongues of the Philippines, of which Tagalog is the

best known. Circa 500 AD, Indonesian sailors crossed the Indian Ocean and settled in Madagascar, making the language Malagasy part of this family.

Several other families are worth noting. Southern India is home to a sizable population that does not speak Indo-European languages; instead, it speaks the Dravidian tongues such as Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam. The Indo-Chinese peninsula is home to two distinct language groups: Austro-Asiatic (Vietnamese and Cambodian) and Thai-Kadai (Thai and Lao). The aboriginal peoples of Australia and Papua New Guinea, who comprise 1% of the world's population, speak 20% of the world's languages in an enormously diverse group often called Indo-Pacific. The Americas were home to a huge range of indigenous languages prior to the mass extermination unleashed by the Europeans; more than a dozen families existed in North America (e.g., Iroquoian, Siouan, Salishan, Athabascan, Mayan) and in South America (e.g., Andean, Chibchan, Macro-Carib). Finally, isolate languages such as Basque, with no surviving relatives, and Kartvelian tongues such as Georgian continue to survive.

Today, there are roughly 5,000 to 6,500 languages remaining in the world. Most, however, have very few speakers, often numbering only in the dozens, and are not written. The total number was much larger in the past and has been declining steadily for centuries. The rise of nation-states often led to deliberate homogenizations of cultures and dialects, and today globalization and national school systems have contributed to the decline. In the Americas, disease, genocide, government-run boarding schools (in the United States), and cultural assimilation annihilated large numbers of languages. Today, 96% of the world's population speaks one of the top 20 languages, and many observers predict that 50% of all languages will disappear within the next century (i.e., one every 2 weeks). This decline represents a crisis in cultural diversity that deprives humanity of the rich ways of viewing the world inherent in having different languages.

Finally, it is worth noting that in addition to the geography of languages, geographers have been increasingly interested in the role of language in the representation of space. If language structures and mediates thought, it plays an enormous role in how discourses about the world are organized. Thus, the geography of language and the language of geography may be seen as deeply intertwined.

Figure 5 Countries in Which Sino-Tibetan Languages Are Dominant

Figure 6 Countries in Which Malayo-Polynesian Languages Are Dominant

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See also

- Cultural Geography
- Religion, Geography and/of
- Spaces of Representation

Suggested Reading

Comrie, B., Matthews, S., & Polinsky, M. (Eds.). (1996). The atlas of languages. New York: Quarto.
Dalby, A.(2003). Language in danger: The loss of linguistic diversity and the threat to our future. New York: Columbia University Press.