

The 10 Most Spoken Languages In The World

Almost half of the world's population claims one of only 10 languages as their mother tongue. So what are the top 10 languages of the world? You might be surprised.

By James Lane | September 6, 2019



Illustrations by [Victoria Fernandez](#).

Determining what are the most spoken languages in the world is a more difficult task than you might imagine. We can say with some confidence that Mandarin, English, Spanish and Arabic will make an appearance (and roughly in what order), but there are some surprises, too! Would you have guessed that Bengali is in the top 10 most spoken languages?

One small caveat: Assigning hard data, in the form of “X million native speakers,” to any of these languages is practically impossible. What constitutes [a language or a dialect](#) is hotly contested stuff. More troubling is the fact that what we refer to simply as “Chinese” is actually a whole family of languages conveniently lumped into a single category. “Hindi” is also used as a catchall term to cover numerous dialects and sub-dialects. We haven’t even yet acknowledged the unreliability of data sources, collected at different times by different institutions.

But then again, who doesn’t love a good list? So we’ve compiled two versions for you:

Top 10 Languages By Number Of Native Speakers

When tallied according to **number of native speakers only**, these are the most spoken languages in the world.

1. Chinese — 1.3 Billion Native Speakers



Numbers vary widely — [Ethnologue](#) puts the number of native speakers at 1.3 billion native speakers, roughly 917 million of whom speak [Mandarin](#) — but there’s no doubt it’s the most spoken language in the world. If you wish to learn a language that one in six people in the world speak, this is the one for you. Seeing as Chinese is a [tonal language](#) that uses thousands of logograms, it will certainly keep you busy.

2. Spanish — 460 Million Native Speakers



If we were only to look at native speakers, Spanish has its nose in front of English with about 460 million speakers. If you want a language that will open up whole continents to you, Spanish is your best bet. As with all the languages on this list, the politics of language and associated identity are highly

Pick a language to speak →

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3. English — 379 Million Native Speakers



If you're reading this article, you may be one of the 379 million-odd native English speakers, or one of the 753 million people who speak it as a second language. This indicates the remarkable success of English as the *lingua franca* of business, travel and international relations. The relative ease with which English can be picked up (especially compared with Chinese) and the pervasive soft power of US culture means that English will continue to dominate the world stage for the foreseeable future. For some, English is still synonymous with opportunity and a better quality of life.

4. Hindi — 341 Million Native Speakers



India has 23 official languages, with Hindi/Urdu chief among them. Whether this is one language — *Hindustani* — or two dialects is still fiercely debated. Spoken mainly in northern India and parts of Pakistan, Hindi uses *devnagri* script, while Urdu uses Persian notation. At the time of writing, the debate about its role in Indian education and society has once again flared up: Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist, is seeking to have Hindi displace English in the southern Indian states as the primary language of official communication and education, a strategy that has been met with resistance. If you ever travel in the Indian subcontinent, a little Hindi will get you a long way. Plus, this is the language that gave us *shampoo*, *jungle*, *jodhpurs* and *bungalow* — what's not to love?

5. Arabic — 315 Million Native Speakers



Recent numbers put Arabic at around 315 million native speakers. But this is another instance of numbers not telling the full tale: Arabic, like Chinese, is so vastly different in its respective dialects as to be effectively a number of languages, grouped as one for the sake of convenience. Modern Standard Arabic is a primarily written form, closely related to the Classical Arabic of the Quran. However, the spoken forms of Arabic in, say, Oman and Morocco are so different that a couple of philosophy professors from these countries

might be able to discuss the finer points of the ancient texts while still struggling to order lunch.

6. Bengali — 228 Million Native Speakers



Admit it: you didn't expect Bengali to be on the list of most spoken languages. The Partition of Bengal by the British in 1947 divided (mainly Hindu) West Bengal, now part of India, from its (mainly Muslim) counterpart East Bengal, now Bangladesh. It is the language of Kolkata, the Andaman Islands, fabulous sweets, and 130-odd million Bangladeshis — many of whom are extremely vulnerable to climate change. By the next century, the population is projected to double while 15 percent of the land area is expected to disappear below rising seas.

7. Portuguese — 220 Million Native Speakers



This is another language whose reach owes much to its colonial past. Starting in the 15th century, avid Portuguese traders and conquerors brought their language to Africa, Asia and the Americas. The spread of Portuguese may have initially been tied to European colonization, but the colonized countries developed their own vibrant cultures that transformed the language forever. Today, Portuguese is spoken by [220 million native speakers](#) in countries like

Brazil, Goa, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Macau. It's also the language of Machado de Assis, Bossa Nova, Mia Couto, Fernando Pessoa, and Agualusa.

8. Russian — 153 Million Native Speakers



With roughly 153 million native speakers, Russian is the eighth most spoken language in the world. Famed for its inscrutable grammar and quite lovely Cyrillic script, it remains one of the six languages spoken in the UN, and produced the literary likes of Dostoyevsky, Nabokov, Chekhov, Gogol, Tolstoy and Pushkin.

9. Japanese — 128 Million Native Speakers



Almost all of the 128 million native Japanese speakers live in Japan — certainly the most highly geographically concentrated of all the languages on this list. Japanese boasts two distinct writing systems, *hiragana* and *katakana*, as well as making extensive use of Chinese *Kanji* characters. The largest groups of Japanese speakers living outside Japan can be found in the US, the Philippines and Brazil.

10. Lahnda (Western Punjabi) — 118 Million Native Speakers



With varying estimates of around 118 million native speakers, the last spot on the list goes to... Lahnda, a Pakistani macrolanguage that primarily includes Western Punjabi! (Sorry, [German](#) — you got dumped from top world languages a few years back.) That doesn't even include Eastern Punjabi, which is spoken in India. The Punjab was sliced in two by the British when they left, and millions of people were forced to abandon their homes, businesses and families. But they're slowly taking their revenge, Bollywood-style: Punjabi songs now account for 50 percent of chart-toppers. That's a comeback if we've ever seen one.

Now, before you get upset with us for not including French, let's arrange our top 10 according to another criteria:

Top 10 Languages By Total Number Of Speakers

When we count the top 10 most spoken languages according to the **[total number of people who speak them](#)** (whether or not the language is their mother tongue), eight of the 10 languages from the list above still make an appearance, but with a few major differences: English narrowly edges out Chinese for the top spot, Japanese and Punjabi lose their spots, and French and Indonesian join the top 10 thanks to the fact that more people speak them as a second language than as a native language.

1. English

1.132 billion total speakers

2. Mandarin Chinese

1.117 billion total speakers

3. Hindi

615 million total speakers

4. Spanish

534 million total speakers

5. French

280 million total speakers

6. Standard Arabic

274 million total speakers

7. Bengali

265 million total speakers

8. Russian

258 million total speakers

9. Portuguese

234 million total speakers

10. Indonesian

199 million total speakers

Which of these global languages do you want to speak?

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James grew up in Australia and has worked as an independent theatre producer, filmmaker and teacher in Hanoi and Berlin. He has written for NPR Berlin, the Newer York Press, ExBerliner and Babbel on issues of language and culture. He is currently based in Delhi, working with disadvantaged children to address environmental issues through film, radio and storytelling.

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