

READING

Language families

LEVEL

Intermediate (B2)

NUMBER

EN_B2_3074R

LANGUAGE

English

Learning outcomes

- I can read and understand the main points in a text about languages and linguistic diversity.
- I can explain what different language families are and discuss the relationships between languages.



Where in the world does this word come from?

Read the text.

Have you ever wondered where a word comes from? How did people decide that the people who take care of babies were known as mum and dad? And do *madre* and *mere* and *mutti* and *mum* have something in common?

These are big questions, which etymology and historical linguistics try to answer. These fields study how languages developed, how they are related to each other, and the derivation of words.

Historical linguists make sense of the world of language using family trees as a metaphor. Like people, languages have parents, grandparents, and siblings. Languages that share a common ancestor—a proto-language—form a language family.

The family of Romance languages are united by Latin, the common parent language for French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese. Because languages evolve over time, the source of a living language is often a dead language, like Latin, that is not spoken anymore.



Can you speak Indo-European?

Read the text.

Language families include a diverse range of languages. The Indo-European language family is the biggest language family in the world. It's so big that there are several branches to this family tree. Branches include Germanic languages like German and English, Slavic languages like Russian and Polish, and Romance languages like Spanish and French. Languages spoken in Asia, like Bengali, Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu are also part of this family.

Nearly half the world speaks an Indo-European language! The source of this rich linguistic mosaic is a reconstructed proto-language called Proto-Indo-European, an ancient tongue which links all these languages.

There are so many Indo-European languages that scholars once thought that all languages were in this family. This was an incorrect belief, as it turns out...



Complete the sentences

Find the best match to complete the sentences, based on what you have read in the text.

1 A common language ancestor that unites a language family is called...

a ...historical linguists

2 Etymology is the study of...

b ...words, their meanings and their origins

3 Language families typically include living languages and dead languages...

c ...which are no longer spoken

4 The study of how languages developed is a concern of...

d ...a proto-language

5 The Indo-European language family...

e ...is the biggest language family in the world



Fill in the gaps

Complete the sentences using the words in the red box.

- 1 I am in the field of _____, the study of languages. I explore the origins of modern languages. Where did they come from?
- 2 The _____, or origin, of this word is Greek. Ancient Greek is the source of many words related to literature and art.
- 3 Think of a proto-language as the parents of modern _____. Proto-Indo-European is an example.
- 4 Translation tells you what a word means, while _____ tells you where a word came from.
- 5 Phonology studies the _____ speech sounds in different languages. There are so many different sounds in the world!

derivation
etymology
linguistics
diverse
language families



Research activity: etymology

Choose a word (or words) below. **Search** them in an online dictionary to find their etymology. If using **breakout rooms** for this activity, divide the words between the groups. **Share** what your group found out with the rest of the class afterwards.



tree

metaphor

diverse

ancestor

world

evolve

baby

branch

mosaic



Same word, different meaning

My **baby** left me for someone else.



Mark is the **baby** of the family, so he was spoiled rotten!



Come on, don't be such a **baby**! You should totally ask her out.



Baby can be used as a term of affection for a romantic partner. You've probably heard it in hundreds of song lyrics!

This is a common way of describing the youngest child. It's mostly meant as a term of endearment!

The word **baby** can also be used to imply that someone is being childish or timid.



Many language families

Read the text silently. **Note** the highlighted numbers for the next activity. What do they refer to?

The Sino-Tibetan language family has the second highest number of speakers in the world and includes the languages spoken in China, Tibet, and Myanmar. The majority of these are the **1.3 billion** speakers of Chinese languages. The Niger-Congo language family includes an astonishing **1,540** languages, including Swahili, Yoruba, and Shona. It is the largest language family in terms of number of languages.

You'll find Austronesian languages in Indonesia and Malaysia, the Philippines, Northern New Zealand, and Madagascar. There's quite a bit of water in between where you find these languages. Because of this, there is great diversity in the structure and sounds of Austronesian languages like Filipino, Malay and Maori. Phonology, the study of sounds and their formation in language, has identified some major differences among the **1,257** languages in this family.



Related but far away

Read the text silently. **Note** the highlighted numbers for the next activity. What do they refer to?

A quick trip around the world introduces us to many more language families! Around **350** Afroasiatic languages descend from parent languages like ancient Egyptian, the earliest written evidence of this language family. Speakers of Arabic, Hebrew, Hausa, and Oromo are part of this group.

Dravidian, spoken in South India, is the next largest family. Looking onward to the Turkic language family, you'll find languages spoken in Turkey, western Asia, and the Balkans. Look a little further, and you see that the **35** languages of the Turkic family are found in the Caucasus and even Siberia. What spread this language family from sunny Anatolia to chilly Novosibirsk? It may have to do with the ancient languages spoken by nomadic tribes, and the historical shifts in power during the early Middle Ages.



Fill in the gaps

Fill in the **gaps** with the correct number in the red box.

- 1 The Sino-Tibetan language family has the second highest number of speakers in the world. The majority of these are the _____ speakers of Chinese languages.
- 2 The Niger-Congo language family includes an astonishing _____ languages.
- 3 Phonology, the study of sounds and their formation in language, has identified some major differences among the _____ languages in the Austronesian language family.
- 4 Around _____ Afroasiatic languages descend from parent languages like ancient Egyptian
- 5 The _____ languages of the Turkic family are found in Turkey, western Asia, and the Balkans, as well as the Caucasus and even Siberia.

1,257
1,540
1.3 billion
350
35

Where does your mother tongue come from?

Which language family does your mother tongue belong to?

How many native speakers of your mother tongue are there around the world? You can do a quick search to find out!



A shrinking number of languages

The 20 most common languages (including Mandarin, Spanish, English, Hindi) each have more than 50 million native speakers. Meanwhile, there are many languages that have fewer than 10,000 speakers. Debate the nature of endangered languages.

1

“

Student/Group A:

Discuss why language diversity is important. Discuss ways to preserve rare languages.

”

2

“

Student/Group B:

Discuss the benefits of having fewer languages that more people can understand.

”



End of the lesson

Idiom

to talk in circles

Meaning: to talk for ages without coming to a conclusion

Example: Okay, I think we should end the meeting now. We're just talking in circles at this stage!

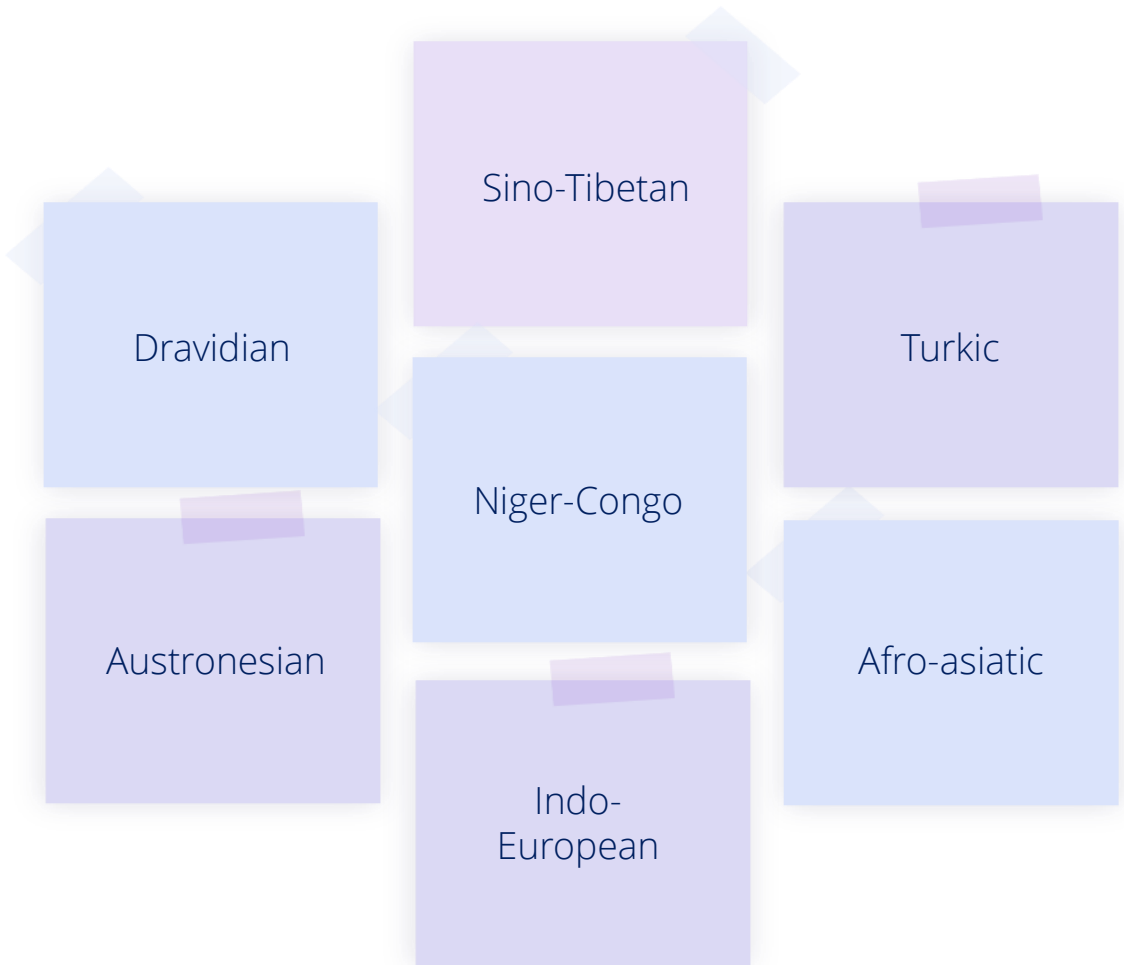


Additional practice



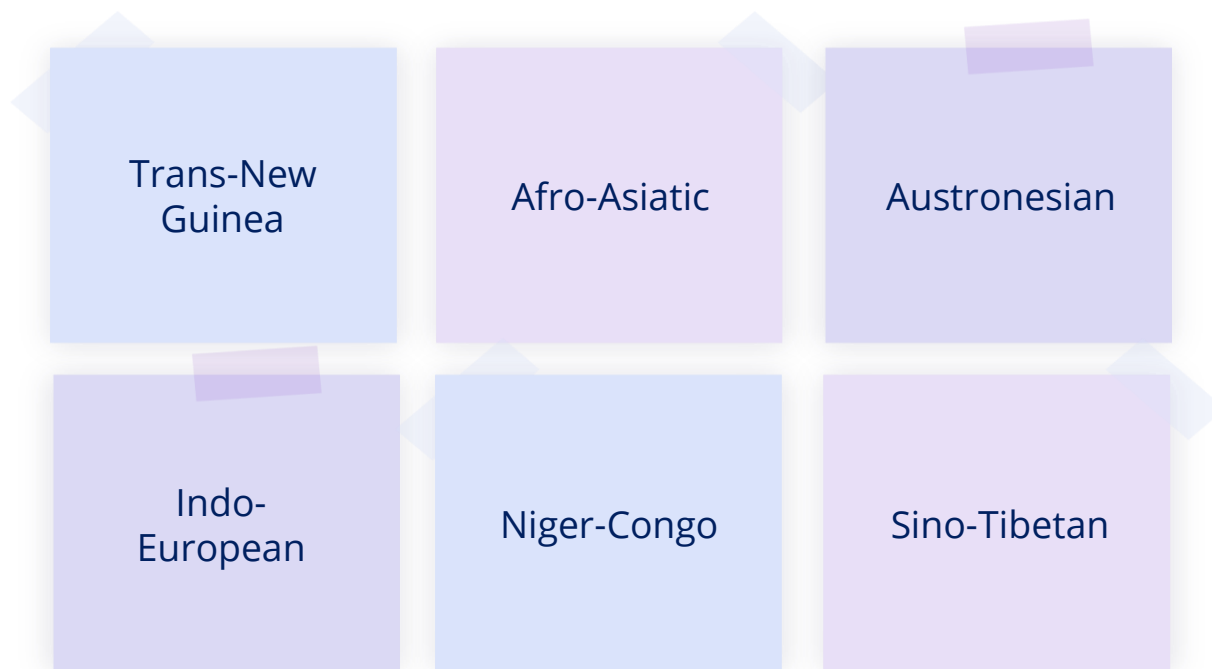
Language families

Can you **order** the major language families by size (?)





Language families



1. These are the six major language families around the world. Can you rank them in order of size (by how many languages belong to each family)?



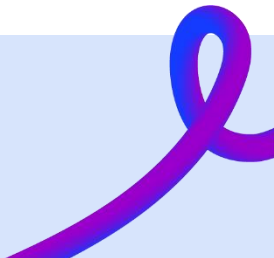
Discuss

An endangered language is one that is at risk of dying out. 50-90% of the world's languages may become extinct by 2100.

Why do you think this happens?

What can be done to keep languages alive?

What type of languages do you think are most at risk?





Scratching the surface

Write down six questions you have about historical linguistics, language families, and language diversity. Share your questions with your class.

I want to know...

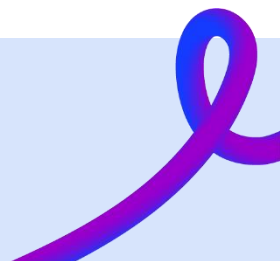
Why...

I'm curious...

How do we know...

How many...

What if...





Answer key

P.5: 1. (d) 2. (b) 3. (c) 4. (a) 5. (e)

P.6: 1. linguistics 2. derivation 3. language families
4. etymology 5. diverse

P.11: 1. 1.3 billion 2. 1,540 3. 1,257 4. 350 5. 35

P.18: In order of no. of languages (as of 2022): Niger-Congo (1,536), Austronesian (1,225), Trans-New Guinea (456), Sino-Tibetan (456), Indo-European (447), Afro-Asiatic (369)



Summary

Language:

- A common language ancestor that unites a language family is called a proto-language.
- Etymology is the study of words, their meanings and their origins.
- The Indo-European language family is the biggest language family in the world.

Etymology:

- The **derivation**, or origin, of this word is Greek. Ancient Greek is the source of many words related to literature and art.
- Phonology studies the diverse speech sounds in different languages. There are so many different sounds in the world!

Language families:

- The Sino-Tibetan language family has the second-highest number of speakers in the world. The majority of these are the 1.3 billion speakers of Chinese languages.
- Around 350 Afroasiatic languages descend from parent languages like ancient Egyptian, the earliest written evidence of this language family.



Vocabulary

derivation

etymology

diverse

ancestor

mother tongue

