

Summary by world area

AREA

The World Languages section of this site provides country summaries and language-by-language information. This section steps above that detail to offer a summary view of the world language situation. Specifically, it offers numerical tabulations of languages and number of speakers by world area, by language size, by language status, by language family, and by country.

Summary by area

The language listings in the three volumes of *Ethnologue* are organized under five world areas: Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Pacific. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of languages and their populations by these areas. Note that the areas differ widely with respect to typical language size (Grimes 1986, 1995).



The *Count* column in table 1 gives the number of living languages that originate in the specified area. A living language is defined as one that has at least one speaker for whom it is their first language; extinct languages and languages that are used only as a second language are excluded from these counts. In this tabulation, each language is counted only once so that the total at the bottom of the column represents the total number of living languages in the world. A language that is spoken in more than one country is counted under the area of its primary country. This has the effect of counting the languages by their area of origin.

The *Total* column gives the total number of people who use those languages as their first language, regardless of where in the world they may live. Note, for instance, that the population given in the row for Europe is nearly twice the actual population of Europe. This is because it is a count of speakers of European languages, some of which are now used as a first language in other parts of the world due to the colonial expansion of the last few centuries. Since it is a count of first-language speakers, any given person should be counted only once. As a result the total at the bottom of the column approximates the total world population. Note, however, that the total is somewhat less than the actual world population at present. This is because the *Ethnologue* lacks population estimates for about 4% of the languages and because it does not automatically extrapolate population estimates to the current year, but waits for reports from reliable sources.

The *Percent* columns give the share of the count for that area as a percentage of the total number listed at the bottom of the Count column. The *Mean* column gives the average number of speakers per language, while the *Median* column gives the middle value in the distribution of language populations (that is, half of the languages have more speakers than that number and half have that number or fewer).

Table 1. Distribution of world languages by area of origin

| Area | Living languages | | Number of speakers | | | |
|----------|------------------|---------|--------------------|---------|-----------|--------|
| | Count | Percent | Total | Percent | Mean | Median |
| Africa | 2,144 | 30.2 | 887,310,542 | 13.4 | 413,858 | 29,000 |
| Americas | 1,061 | 14.9 | 50,704,628 | 0.8 | 47,789 | 1,110 |
| Asia | 2,294 | 32.3 | 3,981,523,335 | 59.9 | 1,735,625 | 12,000 |
| Europe | 287 | 4.0 | 1,716,625,664 | 25.8 | 5,981,274 | 36,400 |
| Pacific | 1,313 | 18.5 | 6,873,346 | 0.1 | 5,235 | 970 |
| Totals | 7,099 | 100.0 | 6,643,037,515 | 100.0 | 935,771 | 7,000 |

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