Distribution of Language Families

Nearly one-half the people in the world speak an Indo-European language. The second-largest family is Sino-Tibetan, spoken by more than one-fourth of the world. Other major language families include Afro-Asiatic, Altaic, Austronesian, Japanese, and Niger-Congo. Refer to Figure 5–11 to see the distribution of these language families and to Figure 5–12 to see the number of people who speak each of them.

Sino-Tibetan Family
The Sino–Tibetan family encompasses languages spoken in the People’s Republic of China—the world’s most populous state at more than 1 billion—as well as several smaller countries in Southeast Asia. The languages of China generally belong to the Sinitic branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. Austro-Thai and Tibetan-Burman are two smaller branches of the family.

Sinitic Branch. There is no single Chinese language. Rather, the most important is Mandarin (or, as the Chinese call it, pu tong hua—common speech). Spoken by approximately three-fourths of the Chinese people, Mandarin is by a wide margin the most used language in the world. Once the language of emperors in Beijing, Mandarin is now the official language of both the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan, as well as one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

Other Sinitic branch languages are spoken by tens of millions of people in China, mostly in the southern and eastern parts of the country—Wu, Min, Yue (also known as Cantonese), Jinyu, Xiang, Hakka, and Gan. However, the Chinese government is imposing Mandarin countrywide. The relatively small number of languages in China (compared to India, for example) is a source of national strength and unity. Unity is also fostered by a consistent written form for all Chinese languages. Although the words are pronounced differently in each language, they are written the same way.

You already know the general structure of Indo-European quite well, because you are a fluent speaker of at least one Indo-European language. But the structure of Chinese languages is quite different. They are based on 420 one-syllable words. This number far exceeds the possible one-syllable sounds that humans can make, so Chinese languages use each sound to denote more than one thing. The sound shi, for example, may mean “lion,” “corpse,” “house,” “poetry,” “ten,” “sweat,” or “die.” The sound jian has more than 20 meanings, including “to see.” The listener must infer the meaning from the context in the sentence and the tone of voice the speaker uses.

In addition, two one-syllable words can be combined into two syllables, forming a new word. For example, the two-syllable word “Shanghai” is a combination of words that mean “above” and “sea.” Ken jian—a combination of the words for “look” and “see,” which would be redundant in English—clarifies that “to see” is the intended meaning for the multiple meanings of jian.

The other distinctive characteristic of the Chinese languages is the method of writing (Figure 5–13). The Chinese languages are written with a collection of thousands of characters. Some of the characters represent sounds pronounced...
FIGURE 5-11 Language families. Most language can be classified into one of a handful of language families. The pie chart shows the percentage of people who speak a language from each major family. You can see that Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan languages dominate, with Indo-European spoken by 48 percent of Earth's people, and Sino-Tibetan spoken by 26 percent. The map colors show the distribution of each family. Note especially the worldwide span of Indo-European languages but the relatively narrow diffusion of Sino-Tibetan tongues. Languages that have more than 50 million speakers are identified on the map.

in speaking, as in English. However, most are ideograms, which represent ideas or concepts, not specific pronunciations. The system is intricate and mature, having developed over 4,000 years.

The main language problem for the Chinese is the difficulty in learning to write because of the large number of characters. The Chinese government reports that 16 percent of the population over age 16 is unable to read or write more than a few characters.

AUSTRO-THAI AND TIBETO-BURMAN BRANCHES OF THE SINO-TIBETAN FAMILY. In addition to the Chinese languages included in the Sinitic branch, the Sino-Tibetan family includes two smaller branches, Austro-Thai and Tibeto-Burman. The major language of the Austro-Thai branch is Thai, used in Laos, Thailand, and parts of Vietnam. Burmese, the principal language of the Tibeto-Burman branch, is used in Myanmar (Burma).

Other East and Southeast Asian Language Families
To some Western observers, the written languages of the large East Asian population concentrations may be difficult to distinguish because they are written with such unfamiliar characters, and their sound has a general similarity. However, Japanese and
Korean both form distinctive language families. If you look at their distribution in Figure 5-11, you can see a physical reason for their independent development: Japan is isolated because it is an island country, and Korea is isolated to some extent because it is a peninsular state.

Chinese cultural traits have diffused into Japanese society, including the original form of writing the Japanese language. But the structures of the two languages differ. Japanese is written in part with Chinese ideograms, but it also uses two systems of phonetic symbols, like Western languages, used either in place of the ideograms or alongside them. Foreign terms may be written with one of these sets of phonetic symbols.

Korean is usually classified as a separate language family, although it may be related to the Altaic languages of Central Asia, or to Japanese. However, in contrast to Sino-Tibetan languages and Japanese, Korean is written not with ideograms but in a system known as han’gul (also called hangul and ommun). In this system, each letter represents a sound, as in Western languages. More than half of the Korean vocabulary derives from Chinese words. In fact, Chinese and Japanese words are the principal sources for creating new words to describe new technology and concepts.

Austro-Asiatic, spoken by about 2 percent of the world’s population, is based in Southeast Asia. Vietnamese, the most spoken tongue of the Austro-Asiatic language family, is written with our familiar Roman alphabet, with the addition of a large number of diacritical marks above the vowels. The Vietnamese alphabet was devised in the seventh century by Roman Catholic missionaries.

**Afro-Asiatic Language Family**

The Afro-Asiatic language family includes Arabic and Hebrew, as well as a number of languages spoken primarily in northern Africa and southwestern Asia. The world’s fourth-largest language family, Afro-Asiatic’s international significance transcends the number of speakers because its languages were used to write
the holiest books of three major world religions, the Judeo-Christian Bible and the Islamic Quran.

Arabic is the major Afro-Asiatic language, an official language in over a dozen countries of North Africa and southwestern Asia, from Morocco to the Arabian Peninsula. In addition to the 200 million native speakers of Arabic, a large percentage of the world's Muslims have at least some knowledge of Arabic because the Quran (Koran) was written in that language in the seventh century. Although a number of dialects exist in Arabic, a standard Arabic has developed because of the influence of the Quran, newspapers, and radio. The United Nations added Arabic as its sixth official language in the General Assembly in 1973 and in the Security Council in 1982.

**Altaic and Uralic Language Families**

The Altaic and Uralic language families were once thought to be linked as one family because the two display similar word formation, grammatical endings, and other structural elements. Recent studies, though, point to geographically distinct origins of the two families. The Altaic languages are thought to have originated in the steppes bordering the Qilian Shan and Altai mountains between Tibet and China. Linguists do not know whether one group originally spoke a single Altaic language or whether the language originated through a mixture of several groups, which merged through interaction and acculturation of different peoples living in the steppes.

**ALTAIC LANGUAGES.** The Altaic languages are spoken across an 8,000-kilometer (5,000-mile) band of Asia between Turkey on the west and Mongolia and China on the east. Turkish, by far the most widely used Altaic language, was once written with Arabic letters. But in 1928 the Turkish government, led by Kemal Ataturk, ordered that the language be written with the Roman alphabet instead. Ataturk believed that switching to Roman letters would help modernize the economy and culture of Turkey through increased communications with European countries.

Other Altaic languages with at least 5 million speakers include Azerbaijani, Uzbek, Kazakh, Uyghur, and Turkmen. When the Soviet Union governed most of the Altaic-speaking region, use of Altaic languages was suppressed to create a homogeneous national culture. One element of Soviet policy was to force everyone to write with the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, although some Altaic languages traditionally employed Arabic letters. Most speakers of Altaic languages are Muslims and are familiar with Arabic letters because Islamic holy books are written in Arabic.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Altaic languages became official in several newly independent countries, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. People in these countries may no longer be forced to learn Russian and write with Cyrillic letters. But unrest continues among speakers of Altaic languages, because enthusiasm for restoring languages long discouraged by the Soviet Union threatens the rights of minorities in these countries to speak other languages that are not officially recognized.

Problems also persist because the boundaries of the countries do not coincide with the regions in which the speakers of the various languages are clustered. The speakers of one Altaic

---

**FIGURE 5-12** Language family tree. Language families are divided into branches and groups. Shown here are language families and individual languages that have more than 5 million speakers. Numbers on the tree are in millions of native speakers. Native speakers are people for whom the language is their first language. The totals exclude those who use the languages as second languages. Below ground level, the language tree's "roots" are shown. However, the theory that several language families had common origins tens of thousands of years ago is a highly controversial speculation advocated by some linguists and rejected by others.

language may find themselves divided among several countries, whereas the speakers of other Altaic languages—such as Bashkir, Chuvash, Tatar, and Uyghur—do not control the governments of independent states.
URALIC LANGUAGES. Every European country is dominated by Indo-European speakers, except for three—Estonia, Finland, and Hungary (refer to Figure 5-5). The Estonians, Finns, and Hungarians speak languages that belong to the Uralic family. Uralic languages are traceable back to a common language, Proto-Uralic, first used 7,000 years ago by people living in the Ural Mountains of present-day Russia, north of the Kurgan homeland.

Migrants carried the Uralic languages to Europe. One branch moved north along the Volga River and then either turned westward toward Estonia and Finland or eastward into Siberia. The second branch moved southward and then westward to present-day Hungary. These Uralic-speaking migrants carved out homelands for themselves in the midst of Germanic- and Slavic-speaking peoples and retained their language as a major element of cultural identity.
African Language Families

No one knows the precise number of languages spoken in Africa, and scholars disagree on classifying those known into families. More than 1,000 distinct languages and several thousand named dialects have been documented. Figure 5–14 shows the broad view of African language families, and Figure 5–15 of Nigeria hints at the complex pattern of multiple tongues. This great number of languages results from at least 5,000 years of minimal interaction among the thousands of cultural groups inhabiting the African continent. Each group developed its own language, religion, and other cultural traditions in isolation from other groups.

Documenting African languages is a formidable task, because most lack a written tradition and only eight are spoken by more than 10 million people. In the 1800s, European missionaries and colonial officers began to record African languages using the Roman or Arabic alphabet. Twentieth-century researchers continue to add newly discovered languages to the African list.

In northern Africa the language pattern is relatively clear, because Arabic, an Afro-Asiatic language, dominates, although in a variety of dialects. Other Afro-Asiatic languages spoken by more than 10 million Africans include Hausa in northern Nigeria, and Amharic, Oromo, and Somali in the Horn of Africa. In sub-Saharan Africa, however, languages grow far more complex.

NIGER-CONGO LANGUAGE FAMILY. More than 95 percent of the people in sub-Saharan Africa speak languages of the Niger-Congo family, which includes six branches with many hard-to-classify languages. Most of the remaining 5 percent speak languages of the Khoisan or Nilo-Saharan families. In addition, several million South Africans speak Indo-European languages, either English or Afrikaans, a Germanic Dutch-like language reflecting South Africa’s Dutch colonial history.

The largest branch of the Niger-Congo family, Benue-Congo, includes three languages used as the first languages by at least 10 million people (Yoruba, Igbo, and Shona). In addition, Swahili is the first language of approximately 800,000 people, and an official language in only one country (Tanzania), but it is spoken as a second language by approximately 30 million Africans. Especially in rural areas, the local language is used to communicate with others from the same village, and Swahili is used to communicate with outsiders. Swahili originally developed through interaction among African groups and Arab traders, so its vocabulary has strong Arabic influences. Also, Swahili is one of the few African languages with an extensive literature.

NIDO-SAHRAN LANGUAGE FAMILY. Nilo-Saharan languages are spoken by a few million people in north-central Africa, immediately north of the Niger-Congo language region. Divisions within the Nilo-Saharan family exemplify the problem of classifying African languages. Despite fewer speakers, the Nilo-Saharan family is divided into six branches—Chari-Nile, Fur, Koma, Maba, Saharan, and Songhai. The Char Merit branch (East Africa from Egypt to Tanzania) can be subdivided into four groups—Berta, Central Sudanic, East Sudanic, and Kunama. The Central Sudanic group in turn comprises several subgroups. Therefore, the total number of speakers of each individual Nilo-Saharan language is extremely small.

KHOISAN LANGUAGE FAMILY. The third important language family of sub-Saharan Africa—Khoisan—is concentrated in the southwest. A distinctive characteristic of the Khoisan languages is the use of clicking sounds. Upon hearing this, whites in southern Africa derisively and onomatopoeically named the most important Khoisan language Hottentot.

AUSTRONESIAN LANGUAGE FAMILY. An Austronesian language is spoken by about 6 percent of the world’s people, mostly in Indonesia, the world’s fourth most populous country. With its inhabitants dispersed among thousands of islands, Indonesia has an extremely large number of distinct languages and dialects; 739 actively used languages are identified by Ethnologue.

Indonesia’s most widely used first language is Javanese, spoken by 75 million people, mostly on the island of Java, where two-thirds of the country’s population is clustered. Another Austronesian language, Indonesian, is used as a second language by 140 million people to communicate with speakers of other languages, as was the case described earlier with Swahili in eastern Africa. Closely related to Indonesian is Malay, the most frequently used language in the nearby country of Malaysia.

The maps of world and African languages (Figure 5–11 and Figure 5–14) show a striking oddity with Madagascar, the large island off the east coast of Africa. The people of Madagascar speak Malagasy, which belongs to the Austronesian family, even though the island is 3,000 kilometers (1,900 miles) distant from any other Austronesian-speaking country.
Malagasy borrows some words from nearby African languages, but the closest language to Malagasy is Ma'anyan, spoken by 150,000 residents in Indonesia's Kalimantan province on the island of Borneo. This is certainly strong evidence of migration to Madagascar from present-day Indonesia. Malayo-Polynesian people apparently sailed in small boats across the Indian Ocean to reach Madagascar approximately 2,000 years ago.

**NIGERIA: CONFLICT AMONG SPEAKERS OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGES.** Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, displays problems that can arise from the presence of many speakers of many languages. Nigeria has 493 distinct languages, according to Ethnologue, only three of which have widespread use. Hausa, an Afro-Asiatic language, is spoken by approximately 15 percent of the population, mostly Hausa and Fulani peoples in the north. Yoruba, a Niger-Congo language, is spoken by another 15 percent, mostly in the southwest. Igbo is also spoken by approximately 15 percent, mostly in the south (Figure 5–15). The remaining 55 percent of the population use one of the other 490 languages.

Groups living in different regions of Nigeria have often battled. The southern Ibo's attempted to secede from Nigeria during the 1960s, and northerners have repeatedly claimed that the Yorubas discriminate against them. To reduce these regional tensions, the government has moved the capital from Lagos in the Yoruba-dominated southwest to Abuja in the center of Nigeria.

Nigeria reflects the problems that can arise when great cultural diversity—and therefore language diversity—is packed into a relatively small region. Nigeria also illustrates the importance of language in identifying distinct cultural groups at a local scale. Speakers of one language are unlikely to understand any of the others in the same family, let alone languages from other families.

**KEY ISSUE 4**

*Why Do People Preserve Local Languages?*

- Preserving language diversity
- Global dominance of English

The distribution of a language is a measure of the fate of an ethnic group. English has been diffused around the world from a small island in northwestern Europe because of the cultural dominance of England and the United States over other territory on Earth's surface. On the other hand, Icelandic has remained a little-used language because of the isolation of the Icelandic people.

As in other cultural traits, language displays the two competing geographic trends of globalization and local diversity. On the one hand, English has become the principal language of communication and
interaction for the entire world. At the same time, local languages endangered by the global dominance of English are being protected and preserved.

Preserving Language Diversity

Thousands of languages are extinct languages, once in use—even in the recent past—but no longer spoken or read in daily activities by anyone in the world. Ethnologue considers 516 languages as nearly extinct, because only a few older speakers are still living, and they are not teaching the languages to their children. According to Ethnologue, 46 of these nearly extinct languages are in Africa, 170 in the Americas, 78 in Asia, 12 in Europe, and 210 in the Pacific.

When Spanish missionaries reached the eastern Amazon region of Peru in the sixteenth century, they found more than 500 languages. Only 92 survive today, according to Ethnologue, and 14 of these face immediate extinction because fewer than 100 speakers remain. Of Peru’s 92 surviving indigenous languages, only Aymara, Central and six languages belonging to the Quechuan family are currently used by more than 100,000 people.

Gothic was widely spoken by people in Eastern and Northern Europe in the third century. Not only is Gothic extinct, but so is the entire language group to which it belonged, the East Germanic group of the Germanic branch of Indo-European. The last speakers of Gothic lived in the Crimea in Russia in the sixteenth century.

The Gothic language died because the descendants of the Goths were converted to other languages through processes of integration, such as political dominance and cultural preference. For example, many Gothic people switched to speaking the Latin language after their conversion to Christianity. Similarly, indigenous languages are disappearing in Peru as speakers switch to Spanish.

Some endangered languages are being preserved. The European Union has established the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL), based in Dublin, Ireland, to provide financial support for the preservation of 60 indigenous, regional, and minority languages spoken by some 50 million Europeans. Nonetheless, linguists expect that hundreds of languages will become extinct during the twenty-first century and that only about 300 languages are clearly safe from extinction because they have sufficient speakers and official government support.

Hebrew: Reviving Extinct Languages

Hebrew is a rare case of an extinct language that has been revived. Most of the Bible’s Old Testament was written in Hebrew (a small part of it was written in another Afro-Asiatic language, Aramaic). A language of daily activity in biblical times, Hebrew diminished in use in the fourth century B.C. and was thereafter retained only for Jewish religious services. At the time of Jesus, people in present-day Israel generally spoke Aramaic, which in turn was replaced by Arabic.

When Israel was established as an independent country in 1948, Hebrew became one of the new country’s two official languages, along with Arabic. Hebrew was chosen because the Jewish population of Israel consisted of refugees and migrants from many countries who spoke many languages. Because Hebrew was still used in Jewish prayers, no other language could so symbolically unify the disparate cultural groups in the new country.

The task of reviving Hebrew as a living language was formidable. Words had to be created for thousands of objects and inventions unknown in biblical times, such as telephones, cars, and electricity. The effort was initiated by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who lived in Palestine before the creation of the state of Israel and who refused to speak any language other than Hebrew. Ben-Yehuda is credited with the invention of 4,000 new Hebrew words—related when possible to ancient ones—and the creation of the first modern Hebrew dictionary.

Celtic: Preserving Endangered Languages

The Celtic branch of Indo-European is of particular interest to English speakers because it was the major language in the British Isles before the Germanic Angles, Jutes, and Saxons
invaded. Two thousand years ago Celtic languages were spoken in much of present-day Germany, France, and northern Italy, as well as in the British Isles. Today Celtic languages survive only in remoter parts of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, and on the Brittany peninsula of France.

**CELTIC GROUPS.** The Celtic language branch is divided into Goidelic (Gaelic) and Brythonic groups. Two Goidelic languages survive—Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic. Irish Gaelic and English are the Republic of Ireland’s two official languages, but Irish Gaelic is spoken by only 350,000 or 7 percent of the people. In Scotland 62,000 or 1 percent of the people speak Scottish Gaelic. An extensive body of literature exists in Gaelic languages, including the Robert Burns poem *Auld Lang Syne* (“old long since”), the basis for the popular New Year’s Eve song. Gaelic was carried from Ireland to Scotland about 1,500 years ago.

Over time, speakers of Brythonic (also called Cymric or Britannic) fled westward to Wales, southwestward to Cornwall, or southward across the English Channel to the Brittany peninsula of France. Wales—the name derived from the Germanic invaders’ word for foreign—was conquered by the English in 1283. However, Welsh remained dominant in Wales until the nineteenth century, when many English speakers migrated there to work in coal mines and factories. One-sixth of the people in Wales still use Welsh as their primary language, though all but a handful know English as well. In some isolated communities in the northwest, especially in the county of Gwynedd, as many as 80 percent of the people speak Welsh.

Cornish became extinct in 1777, with the death of the language’s last known native speaker, Dolly Pentreath, who lived in Mousehole (pronounced “muzzle”). Before Pentreath died, an English historian recorded as much of her speech as possible so that future generations could study the Cornish language. One of her last utterances was later translated as “I will not speak English... you ugly, black toad!”

In Brittany—like Cornwall, an isolated peninsula that juts out into the Atlantic Ocean—one-half million people speak Breton regularly. Breton differs from the other Celtic languages in that it has more French words. Another one-half million are said to have knowledge of Breton but do not use it regularly.

The survival of any language depends on the political and military strength of its speakers. The Celtic languages declined because the Celts lost most of the territory they once controlled to speakers of other languages. In the 1300s the Irish were forbidden to speak their own language in the presence of their English masters. By the nineteenth century, Irish children were required to wear “tally sticks” around their necks at school. The teacher carved a notch in the stick every day the child used an Irish word, and at the end of the day the child was punished based on the number of tallies. Parents encouraged their children to learn English so that they could compete for jobs. Most remaining Celtic speakers also know the language of their English or French conquerors.

**REVIVAL OF CELTIC LANGUAGES.** Recent efforts have prevented the disappearance of Celtic languages. In Wales the *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (Welsh Language Society) has been instrumental in preserving the language. Britain’s 1988 Education Act made Welsh language training a compulsory subject in all schools in Wales, and Welsh history and music have been added to the curriculum.

All local governments and utility companies are now obliged to provide services in Welsh. Welsh-language road signs have been posted throughout Wales, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produces Welsh-language television and radio programs. Knowledge of Welsh is now required for many jobs, especially in public service, media, culture, and sports. As a result, the share of the Welsh people who can speak Welsh increased from 19 percent in 1991 to 21 percent in 2001.

The number of people fluent in Irish Gaelic has grown in recent years as well, especially among younger people. Irish singers, including many rock groups (although not U2), have begun to record and perform in Gaelic. An Irish-language TV station began broadcasting in 1996. English road signs were banned from portions of western Ireland in 2005. The revival is being led by young Irish living in other countries who wish to distinguish themselves from the English (in much the same way that Canadians traveling abroad often make efforts to distinguish themselves from U.S. citizens).

One hundred people have become fluent in the formerly extinct Cornish language, which was revived in the 1920s. Cornish is taught in grade schools and adult evening courses and is used in some church services; some banks accept checks written in Cornish. However, a dispute has erupted among groups advocating four different ways to spell Cornish words. Some prefer to revive the confusing, illogical medieval...
spellings, whereas others, including the Cornish Language Board, advocate spelling words phonetically. When officials in Camborne erected a welcome sign with the name of the town spelled “Kambrom,” traditionalists were outraged, because the medieval spelling was “Cambron.” They argued that “Kambrom” looked too “German,” a harsh insult because it recalled both the successful invasion by Germanic people 1,500 years ago and the failed attempt by the Nazis in 1940.

The long-term decline of languages such as Celtic provides an excellent example of the precarious struggle for survival that many languages experience. Faced with the diffusion of alternatives used by people with greater political and economic strength, speakers of Celtic and other languages must make sacrifices to preserve their cultural identity.

**Multilingual States**

Difficulties can arise at the boundary between two languages. Note on Figure 5–5, the map of Indo-European language branches, that the boundary between the Romance and Germanic branches runs through the middle of two small European countries, Belgium and Switzerland. Belgium has had more difficulty than Switzerland in reconciling the interests of the different language speakers.

**BELGIUM.** Southern Belgians (known as Walloons) speak French, whereas northern Belgians (known as Flemings) speak a dialect of the Germanic language of Dutch, called Flemish. The language boundary sharply divides the country into two regions. Antagonism between the Flemings and Walloons is aggravated by economic and political differences. Historically, the Walloons dominated Belgium’s economy and politics, and French was the official state language (Figure 5–16).

In response to pressure from Flemish speakers, Belgium was divided into two independent regions, Flanders and Wallonia. Each elects an assembly that controls cultural affairs, public health, road construction, and urban development in its region. The national government turns over approximately 15 percent of its tax revenues to pay for the regional governments.

Motorists in Belgium clearly see the language boundary on expressways. Heading north, the highway signs suddenly change from French to Flemish at the boundary between Wallonia and Flanders. Brussels, the capital city, is an exception. Although located in Flanders, Brussels is officially bilingual and signs are in both French and Flemish. As an example, some stations on the subway map of Brussels are identified by two names—one French and one Flemish (for instance, Porte de Hal and Halle Poort—see Figure 13–23).

Belgium had difficulty fixing a precise boundary between Flemish and French speakers, because people living near the boundary may actually use the language spoken on the other side. This difficulty resulted in the jailing of one town’s mayor and collapse of the national government during the 1980s. The town in question is named Voeren in Flemish and Fourons in French. Jose Hapart, its mayor, refused to speak Flemish, which is required by national law because the town is in Flanders. Hapart had been elected on a platform of returning
the town to French Wallonia, from which it had been transferred in 1963, when the national government tried to clear up the language boundary. After refusing to be tested on his knowledge of Dutch, Happers (who in fact knew Dutch) was jailed and removed from office. In protest, French-speaking members quit the coalition governing the country, forcing the Belgian prime minister to resign.

SWITZERLAND. In contrast, Switzerland peacefully exists with multiple languages. The key is a decentralized government, in which local authorities hold most of the power, and decisions are frequently made by voter referenda. Switzerland has four official languages—German (used by 65 percent of the population), French (18 percent), Italian (10 percent), and Romansh (1 percent). Swiss voters made Romansh an official language in a 1938 referendum, despite the small percentage of people who use the language (Figure 5–17).

**Isolated Languages**

An isolated language is a language unrelated to any other and therefore not attached to any language family. Similarities and differences between languages—our main form of communication—are a measure of the degree of interaction among groups of people. The diffusion of Indo-European languages demonstrates that a common ancestor dominated much of Europe before recorded history. Similarly, the diffusion of Indo-European languages to the Western Hemisphere is a result of conquests by Indo-European speakers in more recent times. On the other hand, isolated languages arise through lack of interaction with speakers of other languages.

**A PRE-INDO-EUROPEAN SURVIVOR: BASQUE.** The best example of an isolated language in Europe is Basque, apparently the only language currently spoken in Europe that survives from the period before the arrival of Indo-European speakers. No attempt to link Basque to the common origin of the other European languages has been successful. Basque is probably once spoken over a wider area but was abandoned where its speakers came in contact with Indo-Europeans.

Basque is spoken by 600,000 people in the Pyrenees Mountains of northern Spain and southwestern France (refer to Figure 5–8, the gray area in northern Spain). Basque's lack of connection to other languages reflects the isolation of the Basque people in their mountainous homeland. This isolation has helped the Basque people preserve their language in the face of the wide diffusion of Indo-European languages.

**AN UNCHANGING LANGUAGE: ICELANDIC.** Unlike Basque, Icelandic is related to other languages, in the North Germanic group of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family. Icelandic's significance is that over the past thousand years it has changed less than any other in the Germanic branch.

As was the case with England, people in Iceland speak a Germanic language because their ancestors migrated to the island from the east, in this case from Norway. Norwegian settlers colonized Iceland in A.D. 874.

When an ethnic group migrates to a new location, it takes along the language spoken in the former home. The language spoken by most migrants—such as the Germanic invaders of England—changes in part through interaction with speakers of other languages. But in the case of Iceland, the Norwegian immigrants had little contact with speakers of other languages when they arrived in Iceland, and they did not have contact with speakers of their language back in Norway. After centuries of interaction with other Scandinavians, Norwegian and other North Germanic languages had adopted new words and pronunciation, whereas the isolated people of Iceland had less opportunity to learn new words and no reason to change their language.

**Global Dominance of English**

One of the most fundamental needs in a global society is a common language for communication. Increasingly in the modern world, the language of international communication is English.

A Polish airline pilot who flies over France speaks to the traffic controller on the ground in English. Swiss bankers speak a dialect of German among themselves, but with German bankers they prefer to speak English rather than German. English is the official language at the Airbus aircraft factory in Toulouse, France, and the Meraldi appliance headquarters in Fabriano, Italy.

**English: An Example of a Lingua Franca**

A language of international communication, such as English, is known as a lingua franca. To facilitate trade, speakers of two different languages would create a lingua franca by mixing elements
of the two languages into a simple common language. The term, which means _language of the Franks_, was originally applied by Arab traders during the Middle Ages to describe the language they used to communicate with Europeans, whom they called Franks.

A group that learns English or another lingua franca may learn a simplified form, called a **pidgin language**. To communicate with speakers of another language, two groups construct a pidgin language by learning a few of the grammar rules and words of a lingua franca, while mixing in some elements of their own languages. A pidgin language has no native speakers—it is always spoken in addition to one’s native language.

Other than English, modern lingua franca languages include Swahili in East Africa, Hindustani in South Asia, Indonesian in Southeast Asia, and Russian in the former Soviet Union. A number of African and Asian countries that became independent in the twentieth century adopted English or Swahili as an official language for government business, as well as for commerce, even if the majority of the people couldn’t speak it.

The rapid growth in importance of English is reflected in the percentage of students learning English as a second language in school. More than 90 percent of students in the European Union learn English in middle or high school, not just in smaller countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, but also in populous countries such as France, Germany, and Spain.

Around the world, some 500 million people speak English as a second language, and an unknown number have some working knowledge of the language. Foreign students increasingly seek admission to universities in countries that teach in English rather than in German, French, or Russian. Students around the world want to learn in English because they believe it is the most effective way to work in a global economy and participate in a global culture. The Japanese government, having determined that fluency in English is mandatory in a global economy, has even considered adding English as a second official language.

German companies have concluded that using English in advertisements is good for business. Of the 100 words most used in German advertising, according to Satelliten Media Design, 23 were English words in 2004, including “your,” “world,” “life,” “business,” “with,” “power,” “people,” “better,” “more,” and “solutions.” In comparison, only one of German advertising’s 100 most frequent words (“fit”) was English during the 1980s.

### Expansion Diffusion of English

In the past, a lingua franca achieved widespread distribution through migration and conquest. Two thousand years ago, use of Latin spread through Europe along with the Roman Empire, and in recent centuries use of English spread around the world primarily through the British Empire. In contrast, the current growth in use of English around the world is a result not of military conquest, nor of migration by English-speaking people.

Rather, the current growth in the use of English is an example of expansion diffusion, the spread of a trait through the snowballing effect of an idea rather than through the relocation of people. Expansion diffusion has occurred in two ways with English. First, English is changing through diffusion of new vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation. Second, English words are fusing with other languages.

For a language to remain vibrant, new words and usage must always be coined to deal with new situations. Unlike most examples of expansion diffusion, though, recent changes in English have percolated up from common usage and ethnic dialects rather than being directed down to the masses by elite people. Examples include dialects spoken by African Americans and residents of Appalachia.

Some African Americans speak a dialect of English heavily influenced by the group’s distinctive heritage of forced migration from Africa during the eighteenth century to be slaves in the southern colonies. African American slaves preserved a distinctive dialect in part to communicate in a code not understood by their white masters. Black dialect words such as “gumbo” and “jazz” have long since diffused into the standard English language.

In the twentieth century, many African Americans migrated from the South to the large cities in the Northeast and Midwest (see Chapter 7). Living in racially segregated neighborhoods within northern cities, and attending segregated schools, many African Americans preserved their distinctive dialect. That dialect has been termed Ebonics, a combination of _ebony_ and _phonics_.

The American Speech, Language and Hearing Association classified Ebonics as a distinct dialect, with a recognized vocabulary, grammar, and word meaning. Among the distinctive elements of Ebonics are the use of double negatives, such as I'm not going there no more, and be instead of is in such sentences as She be at home.
GLOBAL FORCES, LOCAL IMPACTS
Language Policy in Australia and New Zealand

English is the official and most widely used language in Australia and New Zealand as a result of British colonization during the early nineteenth century. Settlers in Australia and New Zealand established and maintained outposts of British culture, including use of the English language.

An essential element in maintaining British culture was restriction of immigration from non-English-speaking places during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fear of immigration was especially strong in Australia, because of its proximity to other Asian countries.

Under a "White Australia" policy, every prospective immigrant was required to write 50 words of a European language dictated by an immigration officer. The dictation test was not eliminated until 1957. The Australian government now merely requires that immigrants learn English.

More remote from Asian landmasses, New Zealand has attracted fewer Asian immigrants. However, New Zealand's language requirement is more stringent: immigrants must already be fluent in English. Free English lessons are available to immigrants.

While English remains the dominant language of Australia and New Zealand, the languages that predate British settlement survive in both countries. However, the two countries have adopted different policies with regard to indigenous languages. Australia regards English as a tool for promoting cultural diversity, whereas New Zealand regards linguistic diversity as an important element of cultural diversity.

In Australia, 1 percent of the population is Aboriginal. Many elements of Aboriginal culture are now being preserved, including dance, which was discussed in Chapter 4. But education is oriented toward teaching English rather than maintaining local languages. English is the language of instruction throughout Australia, and others are relegated to the status of second language.

In New Zealand, more than 10 percent of the population is Maori, descendants of Polynesian people who migrated there around 1,000 years ago. In contrast with Australia, New Zealand has adopted policies to preserve the Maori language. Most notably, Maori became one of New Zealand's two official languages, along with English, in 1987. A Maori Language Commission was established to preserve the language.

Despite official policies, only 1 percent of New Zealanders are fluent in Maori, most of whom are over age 50. Preserving the language requires skilled teachers and the willingness to endure inconvenience compared to using the world's lingua franca, English.

Natives of Appalachian communities, such as in rural West Virginia, also have a distinctive dialect, pronouncing "hollow" as bolter, "creek" as crick. Distinctive grammatical practices include the use of the double negative as in Ebonics and adding "a" in front of verbs ending in "ing," such as a-sitting.

Use of Ebonics is controversial within the African American community. On the one hand, some regard it as substandard, a measure of poor education, and an obstacle to success in the United States. Others see Ebonics as a means for preserving a distinctive element of African American culture and an effective way to teach African Americans who otherwise perform poorly in school. The Oakland, California, school board voted to recognize Ebonics as a second language in 1996 but rescinded the vote after protests from many African Americans, as well as whites.

Similarly, speaking an Appalachian dialect produces both pride and problems. An Appalachian dialect is a source of regional identity but has long been regarded by other Americans as a sign of poor education and an obstacle to obtaining employment in other regions of the United States. Some Appalachian residents are "bidialectic"—they speak "standard" English outside Appalachia and slip back into their regional dialect at home.

Diffusion to Other Languages

English words have become increasingly integrated into other languages. French speakers regard the invasion of English words with alarm, but Spanish speakers find the mixing of the two languages stimulating.

FRANGLAIS. Traditionally, language has been an especially important source of national pride and identity in France. The French are particularly upset with the increasing worldwide domination of English, especially the invasion of their language by English words and the substitution of English for French as the most important language of international communications.

French is an official language in 26 countries and for hundreds of years served as the lingua franca for international diplomats. Many French are upset that English words such as cowboy, hamburger, jeans, and T-shirt were allowed to diffuse into the French language and destroy the language's purity. The widespread use of English in the French language is called franglais, a combination of français and anglais, the French words for French and English.

Since 1635, the French Academy has been the supreme arbiter of the French language. In modern times it has promoted
English was the dominant language of the Internet during the 1990s. Three-fourths of the people online were using English in 1995, and three-fourths of Web sites used English (Figure 5–1.1). An even higher percentage of e-commerce was conducted in English then. The early dominance of English on the Internet was partly a reflection of the fact that the most populous English-speaking country, the United States, had a head start on the rest of the world in making the Internet available to most of its citizens (refer to Figure 4–15).

The United States was also responsible for using English-language nomenclature for the Internet that the rest of the world has followed. The designation “www,” which English speakers recognize as an abbreviation of “World Wide Web,” is awkward in other languages, most of which do not have an equivalent sound to the English “w.” In French, for example, “w” is pronounced “doo-blah-vay.”

The U.S.-based Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has been responsible for assigning domain names and for the suffixes following the dot, such as “com” and “edu.” Domain names in the rest of the world include a two-letter suffix for the country, such as “fr” for France and “jp” for Japan, whereas U.S.-based domain names don’t need the suffix.

English remained the leading Internet language in the first years of the twenty-first century, but it was far less dominant. The percentage of English-language online users declined from 71 percent in 1998 to 46 percent in 2000 and 27 percent in 2005 (Figure 5–1.1). Mandarin language online users increased from 5 percent of the world total in 1998 to 12 percent in 2000 and 22 percent in 2005. Mandarin is set to pass English as the leading language of online users around 2010.

English has remained the leading language of e-commerce. In 2004, 47 percent of the world’s electronic purchases originated in the United States, and another 10 percent in the English-speaking countries of Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Still, the share of e-commerce in the four countries declined rapidly in just a few years, from 81 percent in 2000 (Figure 5–1.2).

The share of English-based e-business will decline even more sharply in the future unless the Web sites of these businesses are optimized to be found by increasingly important foreign-language search engines. English speakers have been accustomed to searching the Internet with Google, or perhaps Yahoo. Searchers in France similarly can use the French-language Google.fr, which may yield similar results as English-language Google.

But businesses based in English-speaking countries may not have optimized their Web sites for Viola.fr, the search engine preferred by many Internet users in France. Similarly, German-language Web.de or Japanese-language Dragon.co.jp are alternatives to Google.de or Google.jp. And Google was heavily criticized when its Mandarin-language Google.cn was designed to block Web sites deemed unsuitable by China’s government.
the use of French terms in France, such as stationnement rather than parking, fin du semaine rather than le weekend, logiciel rather than software, and arrosage rather than spam. France’s highest court, however, ruled in 1994 that most of the country’s laws banning franglais were illegal.

Protection of the French language is even more extreme in Québec, which is completely surrounded by English-speaking provinces and U.S. states (Figure 5-18). Québécois are committed to preserving their distinctive French-language culture, and to do so, they may secede from Canada.

**SPANGLISH.** English is diffusing into the Spanish language spoken by 28 million Hispanics in the United States, a process called Spanglish, a combination of Spanish and English. In Miami’s large Cuban-American community, Spanglish is sometimes called Cubonics, a combination of Cuban and phonetics.

As with franglais, Spanglish involves converting English words to Spanish forms. Some of the changes modify the spelling of English words to conform to Spanish preferences and pronunciations, such as dropping final consonants and replacing *v* with *b*. For example, *shorts* (pants) becomes *choreos*, and *vacuum cleaner* becomes *bucnimer*. In other cases, awkward Spanish words or phrases are dropped in favor of English words. For example, *parquin* is used rather than *estacionamiento* for parking, and *taipeir* is used instead of *escribir* a *maquina* for to type.

Spanglish is a richer integration of English with Spanish than the mere borrowing of English words. New words have been invented in Spanglish that do not exist in English but would be useful if they did. For example, *bipiar* is a verb derived from the English *beep* that means to *beep someone on a pager*, and *i-meilarr* is a verb that means to *e-mail someone*. Spanglish also mixes English and Spanish words in the same phrase. For example, a magazine article is titled “When he says me voy ... what does he really mean?” (me voy means I’m leaving).

Spanglish has become especially widespread in popular culture, such as song lyrics, television, and magazines aimed at young Hispanic women, but it has also been adopted by writers of serious literature. Inevitably, critics charge that Spanglish is a substitute for rigorously learning the rules of standard English and Spanish. And Spanglish has not been promoted for use in schools, as has Ebonics.

Rather than a threat to existing languages, Spanglish is generally regarded as an enriching of both English and Spanish by adopting the best elements of each—English’s ability to invent new words and Spanish’s ability to convey nuances of emotion. Many Hispanic Americans like being able to say *Hablo un mix de los dos languages*.

**DENGLISH.** English has diffused into other languages as well. The Japanese, for example, refer to *beisboru* (baseball), *naitu* (knife), and *sutororiberi* *keki* (strawberry cake). For many Germans, wishing someone “happy birthday” sounds more melodic than the German *Herzlichen Glückwunsch zum Geburtstag*.

The diffusion of English words into German is called Denglish, with the “D” for Deutsch, the German word for German. The German telephone company Deutsche Telekom uses a German word *Deutschlandverbindingen* for long-distance and a Denglish word *Cityverbindingen* for local (rather than a German word *Ortsverbindingen*). The telephone company originally wanted to use the English words “German calls” and “city calls” to describe its long-distance and local services, but the Institute for the German Language, which defines rules for the use of German, protested, so Deutsche Telekom compromised with one German word and one Denglish word.

![Figure 5-18 English/French language boundary in Canada. More than 80 percent of Québec’s residents speak French, compared to approximately 6 percent for the rest of Canada. The boundary between Canada’s French- and English-speaking regions is not precise; mixed areas exist along the borders with New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Ontario, and the United States.](image-url)
SUMMARY

The emergence of the Internet as an important means of communication has further strengthened the dominance of English. Because a majority of the material on the Internet is in English, knowledge of English is essential for Internet users around the world. Most e-mail systems and interactive Internet programs do not accept accent marks used in other languages such as French. Languages that are not written in Arabic letters, such as Japanese and Russian, are extremely cumbersome if not impossible to write on the Web.

The dominance of English as an international language has facilitated the diffusion of popular culture and science and the growth of international trade. In Germany, for example, airlines, car dealers, and telephone companies use English slogans in advertising. However, people who forsake their native language must weigh the benefits of using English against the cost of losing a fundamental element of local cultural identity.

People in smaller countries need to learn English to participate more fully in a global economy and culture. All children learn English in the schools of countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden to facilitate international communication. This may seem culturally unfair, but obviously it is more likely that several million Dutch people will learn English, than that hundreds of millions of English speakers around the world will learn Dutch.

In view of the global dominance of English, many U.S. citizens do not recognize the importance of learning other languages. (Does your own college or university have a foreign-language requirement for graduation?) However, one of the best ways to learn about the beliefs, traits, and values of people living in other regions is to learn their language. The lack of effort by Americans to learn other languages is a source of resentment among people elsewhere in the world, especially when Americans visit or work in other countries.

The inability to speak other languages is also a handicap for Americans who try to conduct international business. Successful entry into new overseas markets requires knowledge of local culture, and officials who can speak the local language are better able to obtain important information. Japanese businesses that wish to expand in the United States send English-speaking officials, but American businesses that wish to sell products to the Japanese are rarely able to send a Japanese-speaking employee.

Here again are the key issues raised by the geography of languages:

1. Where are English-language speakers distributed? The origin of the English language can be traced to invasions of England by Germanic tribes 1,500 years ago. From England, the language diffused around the world when English speakers established colonies. Americans and British speak different dialects of English because of relative isolation of the two groups.

2. Why is English related to other languages? English is part of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. Other major branches of Indo-European include Indo-Iranian, Balto-Slavic, and Romance. All Indo-European languages can be traced to a common ancestor, Proto-Indo-European. Individual languages developed from this single root through migration, followed by the isolation of one group from others who formerly spoke the same language.

3. Where are other language families distributed? Other language families with a large number of speakers include Sino-Tibetan, Austronesian, Afro-Asiatic, Neger-Congo, and Dravidian. Each has a distinctive distribution, as with Indo-European, which is a result of a combination of migration and isolation.

4. Why do people preserve local languages? English has become the most important language for international communication in popular arts, science, and business. In the face of the global dominance of a lingua franca such as English, less widely used languages can face extinction, but recent efforts have been made to preserve and revive local languages because of the importance of language as an element of cultural identity.

CASE STUDY REVISITED

The Future of French and Spanish in Anglo-America

The French-speaking people of Canada and the Spanish-speaking people of the United States both live on a continent dominated by English speakers. However, future prospects for these two languages in North America are different.

French Canada

Until recently, Québec was one of Canada's poorest and least developed provinces. Its economic and political activities were dominated by an English-speaking minority, and the province suffered from cultural isolation and lack of French-speaking leaders. In recent years Québec has strengthened its links to France. When French President Charles de Gaulle visited Québec in 1967, he encouraged the development of an independent Québec by shouting in his speech, "Vive le Québec libre!" ("Long live free Québec!")

The Québec government has made the use of French mandatory in many daily activities. Québec's Commission de Toponyme is renaming towns, rivers, and mountains that have names with English-language origins. The word Stop has been replaced by Arrêt on the red octagonal road signs, even though Stop is used throughout the world, even in France and other French-speaking countries. French must be the predominant language on all commercial signs, and the legislature passed a law banning non-French outdoor signs altogether (ruled unconstitutional by the Canadian Supreme Court).

Alerted at these pro-French policies, many English speakers and major corporations moved from Montréal, Québec's largest city, to English-speaking Toronto, Ontario. Fewer than 1 million English speakers—one-eighth of Québec's population—remain in the province. Many Québécois favored total separation of the province from Canada as the only way to preserve their cultural heritage. Voters in Québec have thus far rejected separation from Canada, but by a slim majority.

Confrontation during the 1970s and 1980s has been replaced in Québec by increased cooperation between French and English speakers. Montréal's neighborhoods, once highly segregated between French-speaking residents on the east and English-speaking (Continued)
residents on the west, have become more linguistically mixed. One-third of Quebec’s native English speakers have married French speakers in recent years. Children of English speakers are increasingly likely to be bilingual.

Although French dominates over English, Quebec faces a fresh challenge of integrating a large number of immigrants from Europe, Asia, and Latin America who don’t speak French. Many immigrants would prefer to use English rather than French as their lingua franca but are prohibited from doing so by the Quebec government. Even immigrants who learn to speak French charge that they face discrimination because of their accents.

Hispanic America

Linguistic unity is an apparent feature of the United States, a nation of immigrants who learn English to become Americans. However, the diversity of languages in the United States is greater than it first appears. A language other than English was spoken at home by 47 million Americans in 2000, 17 percent of the population over age 5. Spanish was spoken at home by 28 million people in the United States. More than 2 million spoke Chinese; at least 1 million each spoke French, German, Italian, Tagalog, and Vietnamese, and at least 300,000 each spoke Arabic, Korean, Polish, Portuguese, and Russian.

In reaction against the increasing use of Spanish in the United States, about 27 states and a number of localities have laws making English the official language. Some courts have judged these laws to be unconstitutional restrictions on free speech. The U.S. Congress has debated enacting similar legislation. For a state such as Montana, the law is symbolic, because it has few non-English speakers. But for states such as California and Florida, with large Hispanic populations, the debate affects access to jobs, education, and social services.

Americans have also debated whether schools should offer bilingual education. Some people want Spanish-speaking children to be educated in Spanish, because they think that children will learn more effectively if taught in their native language and that this will also preserve their own cultural heritage. Others argue that learning in Spanish creates a handicap for people in the United States when they look for jobs, virtually all of which require knowledge of English. Bilingual education has also been hampered by the lack of teachers able to speak two languages and by the high cost of hiring additional personnel and purchasing additional materials.

Promoting the use of English symbolizes that language is the chief cultural bond in the United States in an otherwise heterogeneous society. With the growing dominance of the English language in the global economy and culture, knowledge of English is important for people around the world, not just inside the United States. At the same time, the increasing use of other languages in the United States is a reminder of the importance that groups place on preserving cultural identity and the central role that language plays in maintaining that identity.
KEY TERMS
British Received Pronunciation (BRP) (p. 149)
Creole or creolized language (p. 159)
Dialect (p. 149)
Ebonics (p. 172)
Extinct language (p. 168)
Franglais (p. 173)
Ideograms (p. 162)
Isogloss (p. 152)
Isolated language (p. 171)
Language (p. 146)
Language branch (p. 153)
Language family (p. 153)
Language group (p. 153)
Lingua franca (p. 171)
Literary tradition (p. 146)
Official language (p. 146)
Pidgin language (p. 172)
Spanglish (p. 173)
Standard language (p. 149)
Vulgar Latin (p. 157)

THINKING GEOGRAPHICALLY

1. Twenty-seven U.S. states have passed laws mandating English as the language of all government functions. In 1998, Arizona’s law making English the official language was ruled an unconstitutional violation of free speech. Should the use of English be encouraged in the United States to foster cultural integration, or should bilingualism be encouraged to foster cultural diversity? Why?

2. Does the province of Québec possess the resources, economy, political institutions, and social structures to be a viable, healthy country? What would be the impact of Québec’s independence on the remainder of Canada, on the United States, and on France?

3. How is American English different from British English as a result of contributions by African Americans and immigrants who speak languages other than English?

4. The southern portion of Belgium (Wallonia) suffers from higher rates of unemployment, industrial decline, and other economic problems compared to Flanders, in the north. How do differences in language exacerbate Belgium’s regional economic differences?

5. Many countries now receive Cable News Network (CNN) broadcasts that originate in the United States, but even English-speaking viewers in other countries have difficulty understanding some American English. A recent business program on CNN created a stir outside the United States when it reported that McDonald’s was a major IRA contributor. Viewers in the United Kingdom thought that the American hamburger chain was financing the purchase of weapons by the Irish Republican Army, which sometimes resorts to violence in its attempt to achieve unification of Ireland. However, McDonald’s, in fact, was contributing to Individual Retirement Accounts for its employees. Can you think of other examples where the use of a word could cause a British–American misunderstanding?

FURTHER READINGS


Further Readings


