

Language and Culture

In 1979, [schools on the Navajo reservation had about] 80 percent of students speaking Navajo – ten years later, 5 percent. There's just too much English influence to really be effective in keeping our language. [If the Navajo language is lost] we will not be a unique people. We will have no culture; we will have no prayers.

— Marilyn Begay, 5th grade teacher, The Navajo Language Immersion School, Navajo Nation reservation, Arizona

Essential Question: What do the spread of and changes in languages tell about the cultures of the world?

The Navajo, a Native American group of the United States Southwest, face many of the same problems as indigenous people across the world—the loss of their native language and culture in the context of globalization. Currently there are approximately 7,000 languages that people speak around the world; but by the end of the century, about half of those languages will be gone. Most of the languages are spoken by small, isolated groups. As these groups become integrated into the larger society, the people often learn the language of the majority. The traditional language falls into disuse and becomes extinct. Since language is the key element in communication, with this loss of the language comes a loss of a central part of a group's history and cultural identity.

Relationships Among Languages

As the Navajo example illustrates, language is essential to a group's culture. It creates a sense of place and a cultural landscape. The Navajo experience shows that today's communication technologies are reshaping cultures and bringing drastic change to, and even destroying, age-old practices and languages.

Yet language, like all elements of culture, has long been changing. The earliest languages spread from their culture hearths and faced a multitude of local, international, and global forces, including conquest, colonialism, imperialism, and trade, up to the globalization and widespread instant communication of the present day.

Origins of Language

Currently, **linguists**, scientists who study languages, think that humans first began communicating through spoken sounds as recently as tens of thousands of years ago, or as long as a few hundred thousand years ago. They are not sure how language diffused. Was it through the dispersion of people, who carried language with them as they dispersed across the planet? Or was it through transmission, as people learned language from their neighbors? Or was it through conquest, with one people imposing language on others?

Language Families

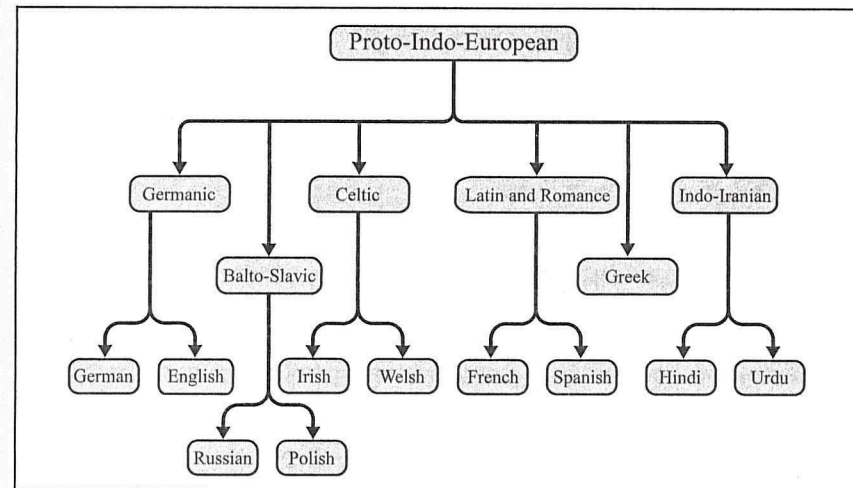
Linguists also are not sure whether all languages descended from one original language. They do believe that nearly all of the languages spoken today can be grouped into about 15 families of languages. The relationship among these language families is often shown on a **language tree** because it suggests how several languages are related to each other, as well as how one language grows out of another.

The distribution of languages reflects human migrations. The migration of Huns from central Asia to central Europe around 1,500 years ago explains why the languages most like Hungarian are found nearly 3,000 miles east of it.

Indo-European Languages

One of the 15 major language families is the **Indo-European language family**, a large group of languages that might all have descended from a language spoken around 6,000 years ago. Nearly half of the world's population speaks one of the languages of the Indo-European language family. This family includes about 2.8 billion native speakers of between 400 and 500 languages.

EXAMPLES OF INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES



English evolved out of a combination of a Latin language (French) and a Germanic language (Anglo-Frisian) beginning about 1,000 years ago.

Within Indo-European, one of the branches is Latin. The history of Latin shows how difficult the study of language is: languages constantly evolve as people move away from the languages' cultural hearths, because of contact with other languages or isolation from other languages.

Two thousand years ago, when the Roman Empire dominated much of what is today Europe, people in the empire spoke Latin. However, as the empire dissolved starting in the 5th century, transportation became more dangerous and trade declined. As a result, Latin speakers became geographically isolated from each other. The unifying language of Latin diverged into distinct regional languages, known as **Romance languages**. Most of these later vanished, but Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, and Romansch survived and grew. The historical connection among these languages is evident in their similar words.

LATIN WORDS RELATED TO WORDS IN OTHER LANGUAGES

Latin (meaning in English)	Pater (father)	Mater (mother)	Panis (bread)	Lupus (wolf)	Die (day)
Portuguese	Pai	Mae	Pao	Lobo	Dia
Spanish	Padre	Madre	Pan	Lobo	Dia
French	Pere	Mere	Pain	Loup	Jour
Italian	Padre	Madre	Pane	Lupo	Giorno
Romansch	Tata	Mama	Paine	Lup	Zi

Note that English words such as *father* and *mother* are similar to Latin words, but words such as *bread* and *wolf* are not. This suggests that English is not a direct descendant of Latin—it evolved from a Germanic language—but it has been heavily influenced by Romance languages such as French.

Accents and Dialects

Languages can be further divided into smaller categories by other traits. One is by accent, how words sound when pronounced. Accents often reflect social class or geographic region. The boundaries between variations in pronunciations or word usage are called **isoglosses**.

Variations in accent, grammar, usage, and spelling create **dialects**, or regional variations of a language. Variations between dialects are large enough that most speakers notice them, but small enough that speakers can understand each other easily. Often, the dialect spoken by the most influential group in a country is considered the standard, and others are modifications of it. "Hello, everyone" is standard. "Hi, y'all" and "Hi, yous guys" are dialectical variations. Dialects often include distinct **adages**, or sayings that attempt to express a truth about life, such as "The early bird gets the worm." The following chart shows differences between two dialects of English: American and British.

DIALECTS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH AND BRITISH ENGLISH

Category	American English	British English
Vocabulary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elevator Apartment Parking lot Trunk (of a car) Gas (for a car) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lift Flat Car park Boot Petrol
Pronunciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lieutenant (loo-TEN-uhnt) Schedule (SKED-juhl) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lieutenant (lef-TEN-uhnt) Schedule (SCHEDZH-uhl)
Spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meter Color Tire Center Theater 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Metre Colour Tyre Centre Theatre
Common Phrases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I'm tired." "I'll call you." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I'm knackered." "I'll ring you."

Within dialects are subdialects. For example, in the United States, a native of Texas is likely to speak a different dialect than a native of New York City.

Often, dialects are the legacy of differences in the past, but they can also be a first step in the evolution of a new language. Just as the Romance languages emerged as regional variations of Latin, new languages are developing today. For example, if the differences between British English and American English increased so much that speakers could not easily communicate with each other, the two would be classified as different languages instead of dialects of one.

Diffusion of Languages

Languages often spread through diffusion—the spread of culture over wide areas through migration as well as by more indirect means. The major globalized languages of the world—English, French, Spanish, and Arabic—spread from their hearths largely because of conquest and colonialism. In the case of Arabic, its use as a standard religious language in Islam contributed to its success.

Some languages never diffuse widely. Mandarin Chinese, though the second most commonly spoken language in the world, did not. Though China was the most powerful and innovative country in the world for much of the past 2,000 years, and its merchants settled in various parts of Asia and Oceania, China never established colonies outside of Asia. As a result, Chinese speakers have always been concentrated in China.

English as a Lingua Franca

Unlike Chinese, English has a wide spatial distribution. English is the most widely used language in the world, with nearly 1.5 billion speakers. Native speakers are concentrated in lands colonized by Great Britain such as the United States, Canada, South Africa, India, and Australia.

However, most speakers of English do not use it as their primary language. Rather, they use it as a **lingua franca**, a common language used by people who do not share the same native language. For example, Nigerians commonly speak one of 500 indigenous languages at home, but they learn English to communicate with everyone who does not speak their language. Globalization and new technology explain why English is a common lingua franca:

- Multinational corporations based in the United States and Great Britain made English the common language for international business.
- Scientists and other scholars, airline pilots throughout the world, and many journalists began to use English to communicate across the globe.
- English evolved as the lingua franca of the Internet and is widely used in social media.
- Television shows and movies are often in English and they are shown around the world.

The wide use of English has made communication among people around the world easier. However, it has also sparked resentment in some who feel that the intrusion of American language and culture dilutes their own unique linguistic and cultural practices.

Other Lingua Francas

Other major lingua francas are Arabic, Spanish, French, Swahili, and Russian. Each has a wide distribution and is often learned as a second language.

Creating New Words and Languages

Many new words begin as **slang**, informal usage by a segment of the population. For example, the word *brunch* was slang before it became standard.

Pidgin Languages

When speakers of two different languages have extensive contact with each other—often because of trade—they sometimes develop a **pidgin language**, a simplified mixture of two languages that has fewer grammar rules and a smaller vocabulary, but is not the native language of either group. In Papua New Guinea, the pidgin combines English and Papuan languages.

Creole Languages

Over time, two or more separate languages can mix and develop a more formal structure and vocabulary so that they are no longer a pidgin language. They

create a new combined language known as a **creole language**. Afrikaans is a creole language spoken in South Africa that combines Dutch with several European and African languages.

On the islands of the Caribbean, creole languages are common. Africans captured and brought to enslavement in the Americas between the 1500s and the 1800s were unable to transplant their languages. Stolen from their communities, they were forced onto ships with captives from various regions in Africa. With no common language among the groups of captives, communication was difficult. Because of this linguistic isolation, most lost their languages after a generation in the Americas. Yet they were able to create creole languages by combining parts of their African languages with the European colonizers' languages of English, Spanish, French, or Portuguese.

The most widely used creole language in the Americas is found in Haiti. Haitian Creole is derived mostly from French with influences from numerous languages of West Africa. It has become an official language of Haiti and a source of national pride and cultural identity.

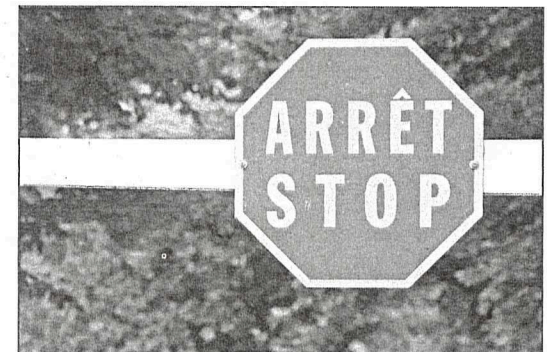
The United States included a smaller percentage of enslaved Africans than did many Caribbean islands, so it had fewer creole languages. One exception is the *Gullah* or *Geechee* language of South Carolina and Georgia, in places where enslaved Africans once made up about three-quarters of the population.

Swahili in East Africa

Another example of language mixing occurred in East Africa. As early as the 8th century, trade between Arab-speaking merchants and Bantu-speaking residents resulted in the development of **Swahili**. Swahili is still spoken by some groups in Africa and is an official language of four African nations: Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Language Policies and the Cultural Landscape

Language is important to a group's cultural identity. Because a culture occupies a certain spatial area, its language becomes intertwined with that place and its landscape. For example, native Hawaiians, whose economy relies on fishing, have five dozen words for fishing nets. In addition, signs in some places create a cultural landscape as they reflect the people's linguistic heritage and tie them to that place—from the single-language signs in France to bilingual signs in places such as Belgium or Quebec.



Toponyms

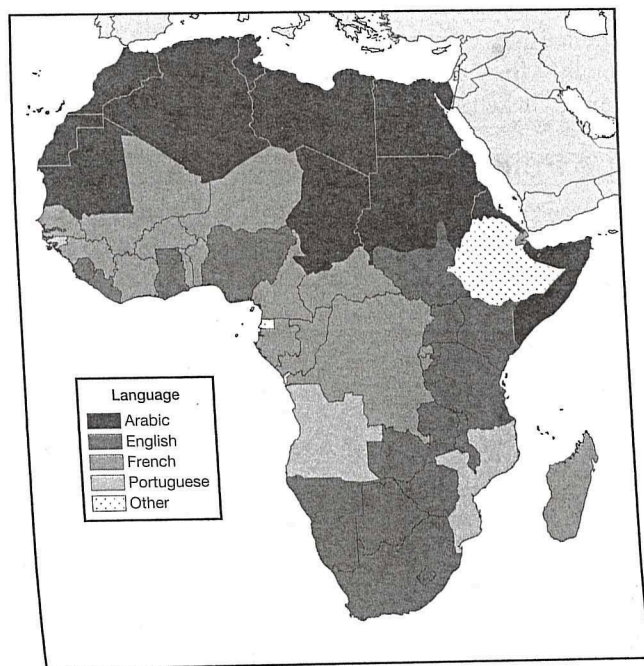
Toponyms, the names of places, reflect culture. For example, in 657 B.C.E., the Greeks founded a colony that they named Byzantium, probably after a leader named Byzas. After the city fell under Roman control, the Romans renamed it Constantinople, after one of their emperors. When the Turks seized the city in 1453, they started to call it Istanbul, which means “to the city.”

Official Languages

While the United States does not have an **official language**, one designated by law to be the language of government, some countries do. These countries can be grouped into three categories:

- Some countries are **homogeneous**, or made up largely of ethnically similar people, such as in Iceland, Japan, or Slovenia.
- Some countries use language to discourage people from maintaining a traditional culture. English colonizers did this in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales to promote quick assimilation.
- Some countries include several large ethnic groups. These countries want to honor all groups equally. For example, Zimbabwe is home to several large ethnic groups, so it has 16 official languages. People use English as a lingua franca to make communication easier.

EXAMPLES OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES IN AFRICA

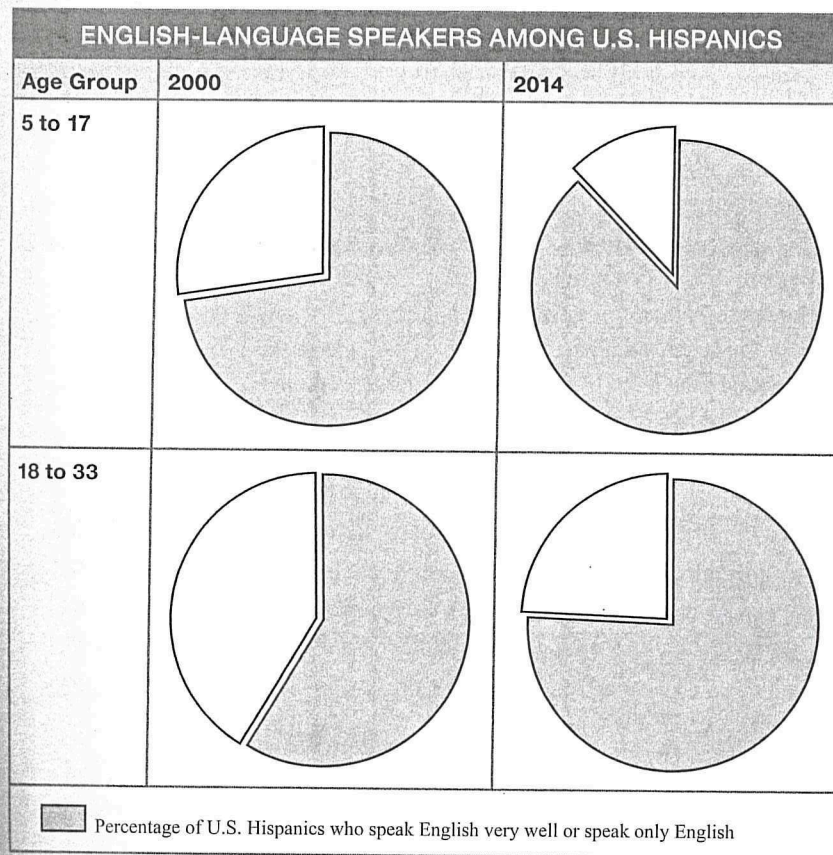


GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVES: SPANISH AT VARIOUS SCALES

What defines the region of the United States where Spanish is widely spoken? Geographers answer this question using various tools, such as census data, surveys, and the cultural landscape. They have found that the Spanish-speaking region changes depending on the level of analysis.

Spanish at the Country and State Levels

At the global level, the answer is the entire country. The United States includes more than 41 million people who grew up speaking primarily Spanish, and another 11 million people who are bilingual. On a cartogram showing the total number of Spanish-speakers in a country, the United States would be the second largest country in the world; only Mexico would be larger.



Source: Based on analysis by the Pew Research Center of data from the 2014 American Community Survey and the 2000 Census (IPUMS).