

Unit 3

The Origin and Diffusion of World Languages

Cultural Geography

A Geography of Language

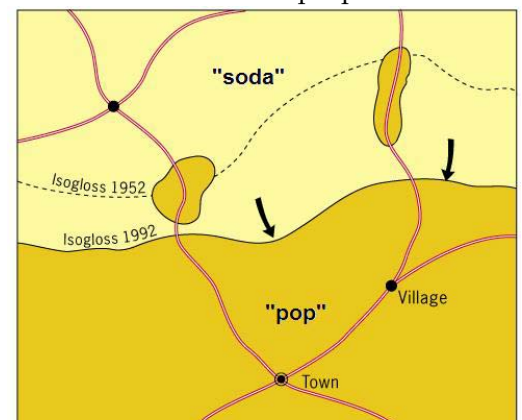
Language is at the heart of culture, and culture is the glue of society; without language, culture could not be transmitted from one generation to the next. Just as language can unite a nation, it can also act as a divider – when a people’s language is threatened, the response is often passionate and protective. For instance, many revolts broke out in the decades after the Congress of Vienna due to new political borders drawn up with security as the main concern, not national unity. Many people who had different languages, religions, and economic interests found themselves thrown together under the same government. To understand the significance of this, we must first understand the seemingly simple concept of language.

To define *language*, it is a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, gestures, marks, or especially articulate vocal sounds. *Vocalization* is the crucial part of the definition. Animals use symbolic calls, but only humans have developed complex vocal communication systems. It is estimated that there are between 5,000-6,000 languages spoken in the world today. A majority come from *preliterate societies*, with no actual written language.

On the broadest scale, all languages belong to a *language family*. A language family is a collection of many languages, all of which came from the same original tongue long ago. Since languages are not static, but change continuously, two members of the same family may sound very different depending on how long ago they branched off. Language families can also be divided into *language groups*, or a set of languages with a relatively recent common origin and many similar characteristics. Spanish, French and Italian, for example, are all *Romance languages* – deriving from Latin.

Language Family	Major Language	Location
Indo-European	English	Americas, Europe, SW Asia, Australia, South Africa
Sino-Tibetan	Chinese	China, SE Asia
Japanese-Korean	Japanese	Japan, Korea
Afro-Asiatic	Arabic	North Africa, Arabian Peninsula
Dravidian	Telugu	India
Malay-Polynesian	Indonesian	Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Madagascar
Altaic	Turkish	Russia, Northern Asia, Finland, Turkey
Niger-Congo	Bantu (language group)	Sub-Saharan Africa

Diversity also exists within individual languages. Technologically advanced societies are likely to have a *standard language*, whose quality is a matter of cultural identity and national concern. The intellectual and political elite will often seek to make this variant the norm. The phrase “the King’s English” refers to the well-educated people around London and the surrounding areas. In France, the French spoken in and around Paris was made the official, standard language during the sixteenth century. *Dialects*, on the other hand, are regional variants of a standard language. English, the most widely spoken language, geographically, has many different dialects around the world. Dialectal differences are often easily recognized through differences in accent. However, different dialects may have different terms for the same thing. For example, a man from England may refer to his friend as a “bloke,” whereas a man from Australia may use the term “mate.” Geographers often map the areal extent of particular words, marking their limits as *isoglosses* – a geographic boundary within which a particular linguistic feature occurs.

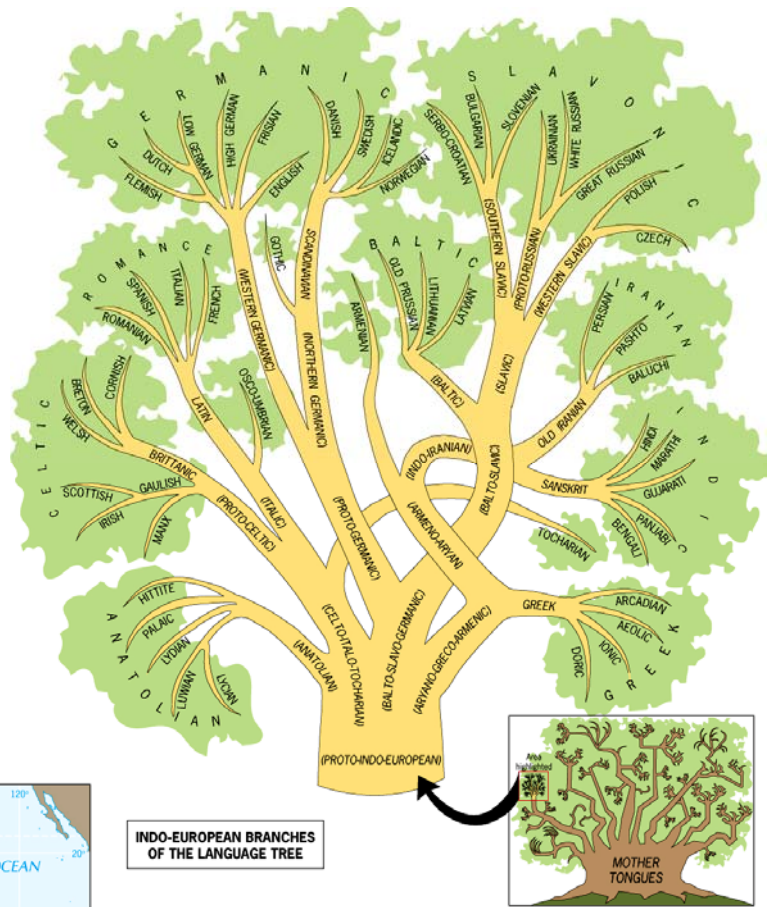




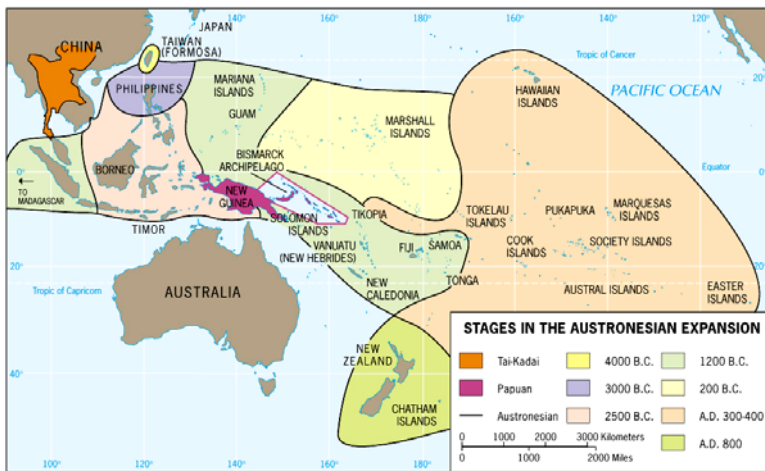
The Diffusion of Languages

The diversification of languages has long been charted through analysis of *sound shifts*. In the 1800s, linguists observed that related languages have similar (but not identical) consonants that tend to “soften” over time. For example, hard consonants such as the *v* and *t* in *vater* (German) softened into *va*der (Dutch), and *fa*ther (English). If it is possible to deduce a large part of the vocabulary of these languages, and even extinct languages (such as Latin), then it is feasible to go even further and re-create the language that preceded it. This technique of *deep reconstruction* has led to the proposed existence of an ancestral (*Proto*) *Indo-European language*; the predecessor of languages such as Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. This proposed language could therefore link to other ancestral languages that existed at that time. Linguists often look for environmental clues in the vocabulary (landforms, vegetation,...).

Many different theories help explain the existence of the thousands of languages that make up the modern language tree. Language *divergence* contends that the basic process of language formation deals with differentiation over time and space. As groups of people diffused and moved away from each other, their languages branched into dialects, became isolated, and then new languages developed. Language *convergence* was fostered when long-isolated languages made contact. Such instances create problems for researchers because the rules of reconstruction may not apply, or are completely unreliable. A further complication has to do with language *replacement*, which is the modification or supplanting of a language by stronger cultures (acculturation). For example, Hungarian is surrounded by Indo-European languages. Also, what proto language gave rise to Basque (spoken around northern Spain) is unknown – regardless, it is a region of Spain that has experienced violence and terrorism in recent years.



Diffusion to the Pacific and the Americas



INDO-EUROPEAN BRANCHES OF THE LANGUAGE TREE

The diffusion of the Malay-Polynesian language family to the Pacific originated from coastal China where farming was well established. The speed of diffusion and simultaneous divergence of languages is remarkable considering the water-fragmented nature of the Pacific realm. The world’s greatest concentration of linguistic diversity is on the island of New Guinea. The rugged terrain, limited technology, and social values limit interaction between different tribal groups, enabling some 900

languages to persist into the present day.

The Americas are dominated by Indo-European languages (due to colonialism). If you accept the Bering land-bridge hypothesis (first Americans crossed over from Asia during the last ice age), it appears the American languages diverged into the most intricately divided branch of the language tree (there may be more than 200 Native American language families). The map to the right illustrates one linguist’s theory of three distinct native language families.



Theories of Language Diffusion

The Proto-Indo-European language hearth has been widely disputed, and at least two theories have come to the forefront. According to the *conquest theory*, the hearth was modern-day Ukraine (>5,000 yrs. ago).

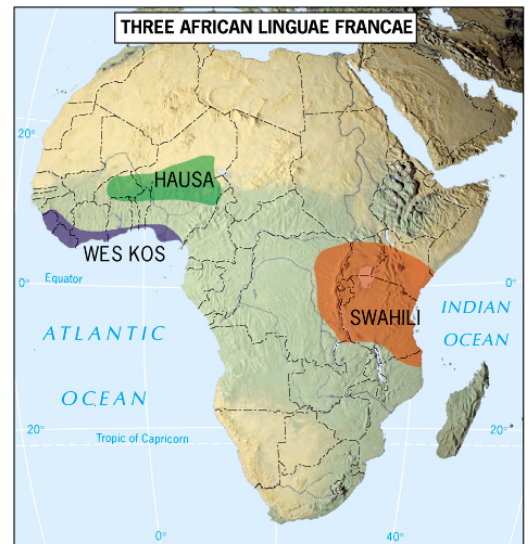
The early speakers of Proto-Indo-European overpowered earlier inhabitants through the use of horses, the wheel, and established trade routes. They then spread their language westward as they moved through relocation diffusion toward Western Europe.

The *agriculture theory* states that the hearth was in Anatolia (Turkey - >10,000 yrs. ago); the Proto-Indo-European language diffused directly westward across the Aegean Sea into the Balkans, to Italy, and northward across the plains of Europe into Scandinavia and the British Isles. There are strengths and weaknesses for each theory, however, the details and subtleties of these theories are far beyond the scope of this course.

Lingua Franca

In the 12th century, merchants from southern France (Franks) revitalized trade in the Mediterranean Sea after the Crusades. They began a process of convergence of several languages (e.g. French, Italian, Arabic, etc.). The language that emerged through this convergence was known as *lingua franca* ("Frankish language"), and it served for centuries as the common tongue of Mediterranean commerce.

Today, a lingua franca denotes any common language spoken by people of different native tongues. Arabic became a lingua franca during the expansion of Islam, and English did so in many areas during the colonial era. In fact, the position of English has become so dominant globally that it is poised to become a "global language." One of the best modern examples is Swahili, the lingua franca of East Africa. Over centuries of contact and interaction, Swahili developed from several different sources.



Language extinction has occurred throughout time, but the process has been accelerated greatly since the era of colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as the economic globalization in the 20th century. Languages such as English or French have replaced dozens of native tongues all over the world.

Influences on Individual Languages

Three fundamental forces have influenced the world's linguistic mosaic. *Literacy*, the first, is the ability to read and write. The level of literacy varies dramatically between and even within countries. Texts are the primary means by which language can become stabilized. Technology, the second, influences the production of texts and the level of interaction of distant peoples. *Political organization*, the third, affects both what people have access to and which areas are in close contact with one another. Many governments have established official languages to protect their national cultures.

Two developments in the late Middle Ages were key in developing the modern language pattern. Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable-type *printing press* around 1450. Although the printing press had been invented by the Chinese centuries before, his improvement allowed for an unprecedented production of written texts (e.g. the Gutenberg Bible). The rise of the *nation-state*, a sovereign country occupied by people who see themselves as one unified nation, was just as important because these entities had a strong interest in promoting a common culture (more unity), and asserted their interests in faraway places at times (e.g. colonialism).

Creolization

When relocation diffusion sends speakers of a language far from their homeland, their language is likely to change. In some instances, a language may change dramatically. Through contact with other languages, it can be simplified and modified to become a *pidgin* (e.g. English speakers met with speakers of African languages in the Caribbean – pidgin English). Over time a pidgin may become the mother tongue of a region, becoming a lingua franca, and is referred to as a *creole* language. This important form of language replacement is known as *creolization*. In coastal West Africa, a pidgin language called *Wes Kos* is continuing to develop. Swahili, on the other hand, cannot be considered a pidgin or a successor to a creole language. Because of its complex structure and vocabulary, it is a distinct Bantu language. Pidgin and creole languages are important unifying forces in a linguistically divided world.

One failed attempt at producing a world language occurred early in the twentieth century. Called *Esperanto*, this invented language was based on Latin and a combination of words from modern European languages. As many as two million people claimed some acquaintance with Esperanto, however, it was not a global tongue – instead it was just another Indo-European language. The experiment lost steam because people didn't want to invest time in learning a language that had no obvious practical utility.

Language and Culture

There are only a few *monolingual states* (e.g. Japan, Venezuela, Iceland, Portugal, Poland, Lesotho). Even these countries, however, have small numbers of people who speak other languages (e.g. >500,000 Koreans live in Japan). Countries in which more than one language is in use are called *multilingual states*.

Multilingualism takes on many forms. In bilingual **Canada**, regional divisions can be found between French-speaking Quebec and the rest of the country. The *Quebecois* have been diligent in passing several language laws (e.g. French signs, menus, etc...). In 1995, they came within a few thousand votes of seceding from the rest of Canada and establishing their own independent country. Language is a potent force in national affairs, and the strongly regional character of bilingualism in Canada poses a daunting challenge to that country.



Nigeria is a much more complicated case study than either Canada or Belgium. It has three major languages, more than a dozen major local languages, and around 230 local tongues! The three major languages are strongly associated with regional cultures and are unsuitable as national languages. When Nigeria became independent, its leaders chose English as its official language (India had done this earlier). An *official language* is often selected by the educated and politically elite to promote national cohesion. Many African or Latin American countries commonly chose the language of colonial power that once controlled them.

In the United States, Hispanics are now the largest minority (according to the 2000 census). It is estimated that more than half of them are functionally illiterate in English. Although this gives them a definite disadvantage, it is not uncommon, historically, as many early immigrants in the 1800s were illiterate in English as well. With the rise of the Hispanic population in the U.S., there has also been a growing interest in establishing English as the official language. *Toponymy* is systematic study of place-names (they can elicit strong passions). When many African and Asian colonies gained their independence, they changed the names of certain places. This has even occurred recently (e.g. Bombay was changed to Mumbai).

A contemporary map of **Belgium** shows the country divided into a Dutch-speaking region in the north (Flanders) and a French-speaking region in the south (Wallonia), with Brussels, the capital, as officially bilingual. The existence of the separate language communities actually tends to foster *regionalism*, separating the citizens of the country. There is some speculation that they may wish to devolve into two separate countries, much the same way Slovakia amiably broke away from the Czech Republic without any violence or shots fired (the Velvet Revolution in 1989).

