Languages

Learning Outcomes

After reading, studying, and discussing the chapter, students should be able to:

Learning Outcome 5.1.1: Name the largest language families.

Learning Outcome 5.1.2: Identify the names and distribution of the two largest language families.

Learning Outcome 5.1.3: Identify the names and distribution of the largest language families in addition to Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan.

Learning Outcome 5.2.1: Learn the distribution of the Germanic and Indo-Iranian, Romance, Germanic, and Balto-Slavic.

Learning Outcome 5.2.2: Learn the distribution of Balto-Slavic and Romance branches of Indo-European.

Learning Outcome 5.2.3: Understand the origin and diffusion of English.

Learning Outcome 5.2.4: Understand the two theories of the origin and diffusion of Indo-European.

Learning Outcome 5.3.1: Describe the main dialects in the United States.

Learning Outcome 5.3.2: Understand the main ways that British and U.S. dialects vary.

Learning Outcome 5.3.3: Understand why it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between a language and a dialect.

Learning Outcome 5.4.1: Understand how several countries peacefully embrace more than one language.

Learning Outcome 5.4.2: Understand what is meant by an isolated language and an extinct language.

Learning Outcome 5.4.3: Understand why the number of Celtic speakers has declined, and how the languages are being preserved.
Chapter 5: Languages

Chapter Outline

Key Issue 1: Where Are Languages Distributed?

Language is an important element of culture that people value. The distribution of languages represents cultural diversity, with an estimated 7,000 languages spoken globally. Approximately 85 languages are spoken by at least 10 million people and 300 languages by between 1 million and 10 million people. Not all languages have a system of written communication or literacy tradition.

The official language of a country is used by the government for laws, reports, and public objects such as road signs, money, and stamps. Many countries have more than one official language and may require all public documents to be in all languages.

A language belongs to a group of closely related languages, which belongs to a branch of more distantly related languages, which in turn belongs to a still more distantly related language family.

Sino-Tibetan Nearly half the world speaks an Indo-European language. Sino-Tibetan is the second-largest language family in the world as it includes Mandarin, the world’s single most-spoken language. The writing style is much different than English because each symbol represents a word instead of a sound. Reading a book requires understanding several thousand of these symbols which are known as ideograms.

Other Asian Language Families Other sizable language families include Austronesian (Indonesia), Austro-Asiatic (Vietnam), Tai Kadal (Thailand and portions of China), Japanese, and Korean. These languages developed independently because the people that speak them live on islands or peninsulas which caused them to be somewhat isolated from each other. Japanese and Korean have some similarities with the Chinese languages.

Languages of Southwestern and Central Asia Arabic and Hebrew are languages in the Afro-Asiatic language family. The Quran (Koran) was written in Arabic and the Judeo-Christian Bible was written in Hebrew, so these languages are very important around the world.

Turkish is a language in the Altaic language family. Other countries that have languages that are part of the Altaic language family include Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Uralic language family has some similarities to the Altaic language, but experts now believe that they have different origins.

African Language Families More than 1,000 distinct languages exist in Africa, but most lack a written tradition. Minimal interaction for thousands of years among thousands of African cultural groups is responsible for all the different languages. The most popular African language family is the Niger-Congo because Swahili is spoken by many Africans as a second language. The Nilo-Saharen and Khosian language families are also notable.

Key Issue 2: Why Is English Related to Other Languages?

Germanic Branch English is part of the West Germanic group of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. Other West Germanic group languages include Dutch, Flemish, Frisian,
Afrikaans, and German. The other important Germanic group is North Germanic. The North Germanic group includes four languages spoken in Scandinavia—Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic.

**Indo-Iranian Branch** Is the branch of the Indo-European language family with the most speakers. The Indo-Iranian branch includes the Indic group which is the main language group in densely populated India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These languages include Persian (sometimes called Farsi) in Iran, Pashto in eastern Afghanistan and Western Pakistan, and Kurdish. The most commonly used language in the Indic group is Hindi. The Iranian group (Iran and southwest Asia) is separate from the Indic group.

**Balto-Slavic Branch** Slavic was once a single language, but differences developed when a group of Slavs migrated from Asia to Eastern Europe. The Slavs were isolated from each other and the languages changed over time. The Balto-Slavic branch is further divided into East Slavic and Baltic language groups and these groups include the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusan languages. These languages are used in former Soviet countries.

The Balto-Slavic branch also is divided into the West and South Slavic language groups that cover an area in Eastern Europe from Poland to Macedonia. The West and South Slavic group includes Polish, Czech, Slovak, Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian languages.

**Romance Branch** The Romance branch is composed of descendants of Latin and stretches from Portugal along the Mediterranean to Slovenia and a pocket in Romania and Moldova. Many Romance languages have multiple dialects, some of which may be variously considered languages in their own right. The four most widely used Romance languages are Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Italian.

**Origin and Diffusion of English** Celtic was the original language spoken by people who inhabited the British Isles, but the Celts were pushed north by Germanic-speaking invaders. Modern English evolved primarily from the languages spoken by the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons. Later invasions of Vikings and Normans further transformed the language. The Normans were from France and actually changed England’s official language to French for 300 years. Remnants of French remain in the English language.

English is not the most commonly spoken language but is the most widely spoken. Its present distribution is largely the result of the British colonial empire. English first diffused to North America and Ireland. English later diffused to South Asia, the South Pacific, and Africa. The United States has also helped diffuse English as well.

**Origin and Diffusion of Romance Languages** The Romance languages developed from Latin. The Romans helped diffuse Latin from the Atlantic Ocean on the west to the Black Sea on the east and encompassed all lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Most people in the provinces controlled by Rome learned *Vulgar Latin*, which was a form of Latin used in daily conversation instead of the strict dialect that was used for official documents. After the Roman Empire collapsed, communication among the former provinces declined that distinct languages began to evolve.

**Origin and Diffusion of Indo-European** Since all members of Indo-European language families are related, they must come from a common origin. Linguists generally accept that all the Indo-European languages descended from a single ancestral language, but disagree on where the language originated and the process by which it diffused. Two hypotheses of the language family’s origin are the Nomadic Warrior Thesis, where the language originated with and was spread by the Kurgans, a people of central
Asia, or alternatively the language originated with agricultural people from Anatolia, in present-day Turkey.

**Key Issue 3: Why Do Individual Languages Vary among Places?**

Mutually understandable yet different through variations in vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation, **dialects** often form when groups are separated from one another. Every word that is not used nationally has some geographic extent within the country and therefore has usage boundaries. These word boundaries are known as **isogloss**.

**Dialects in the United States** The English dialect spoken by the first colonists determined the future speech patterns for their communities because later immigrants adopted the language used in their new homes when they arrived. The original settlements by the early colonists can be broken down into three dialect regions: New England, Southeastern, and Midlands. The dialects from the Southeast and New England are easily recognizable. Dialects’ differences tend to be the greatest in rural areas because people living in rural areas have little interaction with people from other dialect regions.

A fourth major dialect has developed in the West. The standard pronunciation throughout the American West comes from the Midlands rather than the New England and the Southeastern regions of the United States. This pattern occurred because most western settlers came from the Midlands.

**Dialects in the United Kingdom** A **Standard Language** is a form of a language used for official government business, education, and mass communication. The dialect of English that is now considered the standard language in England is called **British Received Pronunciation (BRP)**. BRP was used by upper-class residents in London, Cambridge, and Oxford. Since Cambridge and Oxford are university cities, the dictionaries printed in the eighteenth century used the BRP.

Like the United States, strong regional differences persist in dialects in England, especially in rural areas. The dialects can be grouped into three main ones—Northern, Midland, and Southern. The Southern dialect can be broken into to two subdialects.

**British and American English Dialects** English in the United States and England evolved independently in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with little influence on one another. U.S. dialect differs from the English dialect of England in three significant ways—vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation.

**Romance Branch Dialects** Francien French became France’s official language in the sixteenth century. Francien French was the standard form of the French language around Paris. Local dialects tended to disappear because of Paris’s longtime dominance over France’s political, economic, and social life. There still is a north and south dialect difference in France, though.

Spanish and Portuguese have achieved worldwide significance because of the colonial era. The Portuguese and Spanish language spoken in the Western Hemisphere differs somewhat from the European versions. In Latin America new words have been added to the Spanish and Portuguese languages that were originally words of the indigenous people of Latin America.

**Dialect or Language?** Difficulties arise in determining whether two languages are distinct or whether they are two dialects of the same language. There are several languages in Italy that were considered
dialects of Italian and are now being viewed as separate languages by some experts. There is a dialect of Portuguese and a dialect of Romanian that may also be viewed as separate languages in the future. Creolized languages have formed as a mixture of a Romance language and the native language of a colony.

**Key Issue 4: Why Do People Preserve Local Languages?**

**Multilingual States** Multilingual states can present problems when speakers of different languages compete for control of resources of a state, as is the case for Belgium. Switzerland represents a country with several official languages with few problems between speakers through a high degree of local control. Nigeria has 527 distinct languages and the example of Nigeria illustrates what can happen when language diversity is packed into a relatively small region.

**Isolated Languages** The languages without a language family are called isolated languages. The Basque language is the only language that survives from the period before the arrival of European speakers. Icelandic is related to other languages in the North Germanic group, but it is significant because it has changed less than any other language in the Germanic Branch. There also has been a recently discovered language in India that does not fit into a language group.

**Extinct and Revived Languages** As speakers of certain languages adopt other languages or simply die out, many languages have become classified as extinct languages. The Gothic language of Northern and Eastern Europe and many Native Americans languages have become extinct. Hebrew is the rare case of an extinct language that is actually being revived. Hebrew is one of the two official languages in Israel.

**Preserving Endangered Languages: Celtic** Two thousand years ago, Celtic languages were spoken in much of present-day Germany, France, Northern Italy, and the British Isles. Today Celtic languages survive only in remote parts of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Recent efforts have prevented the disappearance of Celtic even though it is a precarious struggle with the diffusion of alternative languages used by people with greater political and economic strength. Welsh, Irish, Breton, Scottish, and Cornish are languages in the Celtic language branch.

**Aboriginal and Maori in Australia and New Zealand** Both Australia and New Zealand have English as a dominant language though languages that predate British settlement survive in both countries. Australia and New Zealand have taken measures to encourage new immigrants to speak or learn English. New Zealand has more policies than Australia to preserve aboriginal languages predating British colonization. On the other hand, New Zealand’s language requirement for immigrants is more stringent than Australia’s.

**English: An Example of a Lingua Franca** English is a language of international communication, which is also known as a lingua franca. People in smaller countries need to learn English to fully participate in the global economy. Some speakers of other languages speak a pidgin language, which is a form of speech that adopts a simplified grammar and limited vocabulary of a lingua franca. A pidgin language is used among speakers of two different languages.

**Expansion Diffusion of English** Lingua francas like English were once spread by migration and conquest, but now English is spreading through expansion diffusion. English is constantly changing from different cultural influences. Some African Americans speak Ebonics, which is a dialect of English that
was originally used as a code not understood by the slaves white masters. Appalachian English is a dialect of the Appalachian region and is a source of regional pride but has long been regarded by other Americans as a sign of poor education.

**Diffusion to Other Languages** English is diffusing into other languages, as is the case for *Franglais*, a mixture of French and English, and *Spanglish*, a mixture of Spanish and English. The mix of German and English words is called *Denglish*.

**Spanish and French in the United States and Canada** Spanish has become an increasingly important language in recent years because of the large scale immigration from Latin America. In some communities, public notices, government documents, and advertising are printed in Spanish. In a reaction against the increasing use of Spanish in the United States, 30 states have laws making English the official language.

French is one of Canada’s two official languages, along with English. Most French speakers in Canada live in Quebec, and French must be the predominate language on all commercial signs. Quebec has renamed towns, rivers, and mountains that originally had English names. Many immigrants who move to Quebec would prefer to use English rather than French as their lingua franca but are prohibited from doing so by the Quebec government.

**English on the Internet** English has been the most important language on the Internet. Many non-English speakers have had difficulties with the Internet because the United States created the English-language nomenclature for the Internet that the rest of the world has followed. As more users from more countries gain Internet access, the balance is shifting so that English is no longer as important. Mandarin will probably replace English as the most-frequently used online language before 2020.

**Introducing the Chapter**

This chapter begins the text’s discussion of culture as something people value, or *care about*, as opposed to material things that people *take care of*.

Language issues are part of many debates over immigration, national identity, and separatist movements around the world. Start a discussion with the seemingly obvious observation that culture is difficult to communicate, and thus diffuse, across a language barrier.

**Icebreakers**

**American Monolingualism**

The chapter introduces the concept of language diversity with a discussion of how few languages most Americans speak or understand. Another way to introduce this is with the following joke:

Q: What do you call a person who speaks multiple languages?

A: A polyglot.
Q: What do you call a person who speaks two languages?
A: Bilingual.

Q: What do you call a person who speaks only one language?
A: American.

Follow this attempt at humor with a question on why so few Americans know more than one language. Answers will vary from the global prominence of English to the misconception that “English is easy.”

Dialects

Ask the students if they think they speak a particular U.S. dialect. Then go to this website: alphadictionary.com/articles/yankeetest.html

You can do this in class. Just have them put their answers down on a piece of paper and go over the answers when they are done. Your students will enjoy this.

Challenges to Comprehension

“English Is Easy”

Students who speak English and have since birth have the impression that English is an easy or “natural” language to learn while other languages are not.

Try having a conversation with the class on why so few Americans speak other languages other than English. A few students may volunteer that English is simple, but students with knowledge of other languages will be able to correct them. Some may also offer that it is not necessary to speak any other languages, which can prompt a discussion on globalization and the value of understanding other languages.

Assignments

Review/Reflection Questions

- Why do so few Americans speak another language other than English? Answer the question from a personal perspective and a national perspective.
- How do you think Americans who travel abroad but don’t speak other languages are perceived by residents of the places they visit? Compare this to the way recent immigrants to the United States are perceived by English-only speakers in the United States. Can a direct comparison be made? What is the difference between these situations?
- Debate continues over whether English should be the official language of the United States and whether schools should teach in languages other than English. Give an argument for school being taught only in English, and one supporting teaching with other languages in our schools. Which argument do you support, and why? Cite any references you use.
- Give several inoffensive examples of words you use that your parents wouldn’t understand. What does this reveal about the nature of languages?
Chapter 5: Languages

- Apply the book’s comparison of language in multilingual states to this country. Which approach do you believe would work better, and why? Given current immigration trends, will this be a concern?

**Toponym Analysis**

Toponyms reveal a lot about the culture, history, and physical geography of your state. Find a detailed map of your state. It needs to have both political features (cities and counties) and physical features (rivers, mountains, and lakes) labeled.

First, identify what non-English language or languages are prominently used in your state’s place names. Are Native American words commonly used in your state’s place names? Identify any place names that are transplanted from elsewhere (e.g., New London, Connecticut, or Rome, New York). What do these place names reveal about the cultural history of your state?

Next, identify any historical people used in your state’s place names (Columbus, Ohio, or Lincoln, Nebraska)? Some of the names of the people used in the place names of your state may be very important to the history of the local area, but unknown nationally. Places may also be named for the kings and dukes of the resident’s home country.

Lastly, identify any descriptions of physical features used in your state’s political place names (e.g., Grand Rapids, Michigan, or Long Beach, California)? Do these names accurately represent the physical landscape of the area? Are there any place names in your state that represent the native flora and fauna (e.g., Southern Pines, North Carolina, or Wolf Point, Montana)?

Summarize your findings in a few paragraphs. What other questions does your analysis raise?

**Thinking Geographically Questions**

5.1: What features of the Sino-Tibetan family make it especially difficult to learn to speak and to write the languages?

Many languages in the Sino-Tibetan language family use ideograms to write. Ideograms are a system of writing in which each symbol represents an idea or concept rather than a specific sound. The ability to read a book in a Sino-Tibetan language family requires a person to understand several thousand ideograms.

5.2: Should the United States make English the official language? Why or why not? Should more than one language be made official? If so, which ones?

I think that English should be the official language of the United States. We should accommodate non-English speakers, but are goal should be for everybody to be able to speak English. We should help those who are not fluent in the English language become fluent because studies show that people that do not speak English will not be as economically successful as people who speak English. People who want to speak another language at home should feel free to do so, but they should be able to communicate in English.
5.3. Based on the comparison of Figure 5-25 center and right, which dialects are forecast to expand, and which are expected to contract by 2030? What geographic factor would account for this changing distribution?

The North-east, West Midlands, South-west, and South-east dialects are expected to expand. The East Anglia, South Central, West Yorkshire, and Yorkshire dialects are expected to contract. Most of the dialects that are expanding are starting to expand their isogloss into adjacent regions. This change reflects patterns of migration in the United Kingdom.

5.4: Because of Quebec’s French language and culture, some in the province have advocated Quebec separating from Canada and becoming an independent nation. Is a monolingual nation preferable to a bilingual one? State your argument for or against Quebec’s independence.

I believe that a monolingual country is more ideal than a multilingual country. Many times it seems like a single language is used by the upper class and people in government. Other languages spoken within a country are usually spoken by the poor or working class. This usually creates cultural and ethnic tensions within a country. The people in power many times frown upon people speaking a language different than their own. The people not speaking the language of the people in power often feel that they are being discriminated against for speaking their native tongue. This situation can lead to a civil war.

Pause and Reflect Questions

5.1.1: Based on Figure 5-3, what are the language family, branch, and group to which English belongs?

English is in the Indo-European language family, Germanic branch, and West Germanic group.

5.1.3: If you are trying to recall where in the world language families are distributed, keep in mind that most of them are named for regions or countries. Based on their names, how would you expect the language families Austronesian and Austro-Asiatic to differ in their distribution?

I would guess that the Austronesian language family is spoken by the native people of Australia and Indonesia. I might guess that Austro-Asiatic language family is spoken by people in Southeast Asia and maybe a few islands in the South Pacific.

5.2.2: On the map of Europe, which branch predominates to the north, which to the south, and which to the east?

The Germanic branch is found in the north, the Balto-Slavic branch in the east, and the Romance branch in the south.

5.2.3: School and university—which is Germanic and which is Romance?

School is a Germanic word and university is a Romance word.
5.2.4: Which hypothesis appeals more to you, the “war” or the “peace” hypothesis? Why?

I like the “war” hypothesis more. Having the Indo-European language family being diffused by nomadic warriors sounds more exciting than it being spread by sedentary farmers. I have no idea what group really diffused it.

5.3.1: Does your English fall into one of these dialects? Why or why not?

My dialect has more in common with the Midlands dialect than with the New England or Southeastern dialect. I live in California and the standard pronunciation throughout the American West comes from the Midlands. This pattern occurred because most western settlers came from the Midlands.

5.3.2: In the British English dialect, “circus” has a second meaning in addition to a carnival with clowns. What is it?

Circus in the British English dialect also means a circular area in a town where several streets cross one another. The Piccadilly Circus is a very well-known area in London and the name has nothing to do with the typical American meaning of circus.

5.3.3: Five hundred years from now, why might Spanish tourists in Peru not be easily understood by the Peruvians if they speak their own version of Spanish?

The Spanish language in Latin America is different in some ways from the Spanish language used in Spain. The Spanish speakers in the Western Hemisphere are starting to use indigenous words that were being used before the Spanish arrived. Since Latin America and Spain are geographically distant from each other, the Spanish language is slowly changing in both locations but independent of one another.

5.4.2: Can you think of other words that would not have existed in ancient times?

You can determine how advanced a culture is simply by determining how many words their language posses. Folk cultures will posses much fewer words than a popular culture. There have been thousands of words created since ancient times.

5.4.3: Use Google Translates to type something in English and see its translation in Irish and Welsh. Do Irish and Welsh appear similar or very different?

Irish, Welsh, and English are in the Indo-European language family, but their similarities stop there. Irish and Welsh are in different language branches and groups than English. Irish and Welsh have almost nothing in common with English.

5.4.6: Which language policy do you favor, Australia’s or New Zealand’s? Why?

I like Australia’s language policy more. I think that a monolingual society functions better than a multilingual society. A country where multiple languages are spoken has more potential for civil unrest and there is often times a lack of a national unity.
5.4.5: Should AAVE be taught in schools? Why or why not?

I don’t think Ebonics should be taught in school. Many people assume that individuals who speak Ebonics are poorly educated. A person who speaks Ebonics will have a much harder time finding a good job in this very competitive job market.

5.4.4: Go to the home page of Google in a language other than English. How similar or different does it appear from the familiar English version?

I went to the Google Spanish website. It looks exactly the same as the English version only the words are in Spanish instead of English.

Google Earth Questions

Google Earth 5.1: Asakusa Shin-Nakamise is a shopping area in Tokyo. What are examples of English-language signs in the area?

Testa Rossa Cafe is the nearest English-language sign to the Google Earth marker for this street.

Google Earth 5.2: Fly to Kutuluk, Russia, near the northern shore of the Caspian Sea and switch to ground-level view. Does the ancient homeland of the Kurgan warriors appear flat or mountainous? Grasslands or forests?

Flat grasslands.

Google Earth 5.3: Circus, such as Piccadilly Circus in London, is an example of a British word that differs from American usage. The name Piccadilly can be traced to a house by that name built around 1612 by Robert Baker, a tailor who had a shop that sold stiff collars known as piccadills. Based on the feature visible here in the middle of Piccadilly Circus what would be the American equivalent of a circus?

The circle in the center of the image.

Google Earth 5.4: Fly to 47 Mostyn St, Llandudno, Wales. In what language are most of the shop signs? In what language are most of the street signs and the sign in front of the church?

Most of the shop signs are in English. Most of the street signs and the sign in front of the church are in Welsh.

Resources

Ethnologue

This is the definitive online source for cataloging, documenting, and understanding world languages.

Despite widespread belief to the contrary, there is no official language of the federal government of the United States. Here is the website of one organization that hopes to make it so:

www.us-english.org/

Office of English Language Acquisition, U.S. Department of Education

www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oela/index.html

Connections between Chapters

Back to Chapter 4

An obvious parallel is comparing culture’s globalization and corresponding diminishment of folk cultures and cultural diversity to the globalization of English and the corresponding threat to smaller languages. While efforts to preserve both folk cultures and local languages are underway, globalization poses a threat to diversity in each case.

Forward to Chapter 6

A major difference between language and religion is the problem of exclusive adherence: While conflicts can arise over language differences, it is possible for people to learn more than one language and/or for translation to occur. Contrastingly, most religious ideologies prohibit the practice of more than one faith and strongly discourage communication with other religions for any purpose other than conversation!