System of human communication. Although there are more than 4,000 different languages, they have many characteristics in common. Almost every human language uses a fundamentally similar grammatical structure, or syntax, even though they may not be linked in vocabulary or origin. Families of languages have been constructed (Afro-Asiatic, Austronesian, Dravidian, Indo-European, Niger-Congo, Sino-Tibetan) but their composition and origins are the subject of continuing debate. Historical studies of language are undertaken by the disciplines of etymology and philology. Linguistics usually involves contemporary language. See also grammar; inflection; sign language.

Summary Article: language
From The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

Human communication through speech, writing, or both. Different nationalities or ethnic groups typically have different languages or variations on particular languages; for example, Armenians speaking the Armenian language and British and Americans speaking distinctive varieties of the English language. One language may have various dialects, which may be seen by those who use them as languages in their own right. There are about 6,000 languages spoken worldwide, but 90% of these are in some danger of falling into disuse. More than half the world’s population speaks one of just five languages – Chinese, English, Hindi, Russian, and Spanish.

The term language is also used for systems of communication with languagelike qualities, such as animal language (the way animals communicate), body language (gestures and expressions used to communicate ideas), sign language (gestures for the deaf or for use as a lingua franca, as among American Indians), and computer languages (such as BASIC and COBOL).

Language media Natural human language has a neurological basis centred on the left hemisphere of the brain and is expressed through two distinct media in most present-day societies: mouth and ear (the medium of sound, or phonic medium), and hand and eye (the medium of writing, or graphic medium).

Language acquisition Language appears to develop in all children under normal circumstances, either as a unilingual or multilingual skill, crucially between the ages of one and five, and as a necessary interplay of innate and environmental factors. Any child can learn any language, under the appropriate conditions.

Languages and dialects When forms of language are as distinct as Dutch and Arabic, it is obvious that they are different languages. When, however, they are mutually intelligible, as are Dutch and Flemish, a categorical distinction is harder to make. Rather than say that Dutch and Flemish are dialects of a common Netherlandic language, as some scholars put it, Dutch and Flemish speakers may, for traditional reasons that include ethnic pride and political distinctness, prefer to talk about two distinct languages. To strengthen the differences among similar languages, groups may emphasize those differences (for example, the historical distancing of Portuguese from Castilian Spanish) or adopt
different scripts (Urdu is written in Arabic script, its relative Hindi in Devanagari script). From outside, Italian appears to be a single language; inside Italy, it is a standard variety resting on a base of many very distinct dialects. The terms ‘language’ and ‘dialect’ are not therefore easily defined and distinguished. English is today the most widespread world language, but it has so many varieties (often mutually unintelligible) that scholars now talk about ‘Englishes’ and even ‘the English languages’ – all, however, are united for international purposes by Standard English.

**Language families** When scholars decide that languages are cognate (that is, have a common origin), they group them into a **language family**. Membership of a family is established through a range of correspondences, such as *f* and *p* in certain English and Latin words (as in *father/pater* and *fish/piscis*). By such means, English and Latin are shown to have long ago shared a common ‘ancestor’. Some languages, such as French, Spanish, and Italian, fall easily into family groups, while others, such as Japanese, are not easy to classify, and others still, such as Basque, appear to have no linguistic kin anywhere (and are known as **isolates**). The families into which the languages of the world are grouped include the Indo-European (the largest, with subfamilies or branches from northern India to Ireland), the Hamito-Semitic or Afro-Asiatic (with a Hamitic branch in North Africa and a Semitic branch in West Asia and Africa, and containing Arabic, Hebrew, and Berber), the Finno-Ugric (including Finnish and Hungarian), the Sino-Tibetan (including Chinese and Tibetan), the Malayo-Polynesian or Austronesian (including Malay and Maori), and the Uto-Aztecan (one of many American Indian families, including Ute and Aztec or Nahuatl).

Linguists estimate that there are about 6,000 distinct languages in the world. The number is uncertain because: (1) it is not always easy to establish whether a speech form is a distinct language or a dialect of another language; (2) some parts of the world remain incompletely explored (such as New Guinea); and (3) the rate of **language death** is often unknown (for example, in Amazonia, where many undescribed American Indian languages have died out). It is also difficult to estimate the precise number of speakers of many languages, especially where communities mix elements from several languages elsewhere used separately (as in parts of India). The Indo-European language family is considered to have about 2 billion speakers worldwide, Sino-Tibetan about 1,040 million, Hamito-Semitic about 230 million, and Malayo-Polynesian about 200 million. Chinese (which may or may not be a single language) is spoken by around 1 billion people, English by about 350 million native speakers and at least the same number of non-natives, Spanish by 250 million, Hindi 200 million, Arabic 150 million, Russian 150 million, Portuguese 135 million, Japanese 120 million, German 100 million, French 70 million, Italian 60 million, Korean 60 million, Tamil 55 million, and Vietnamese 50 million.

One of the world's richest language banks is Papua New Guinea. In 1995 it was estimated that there were more than 100 languages in Papua New Guinea threatened with extinction. The trend is linked largely to the destruction of natural habitat by foreign commercial exploitation. In the Americas, 100 languages, each of which has fewer than 300 speakers, are all close to extinction. North America, which once had several hundred languages, had only about 100 languages left in 1995.

**essays**

American English and British English

British and American English

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