

Indo-European Languages

There are thousands of languages existing in the world. Nobody can say exact numbers. One of the reasons is that it is sometimes very difficult to identify whether the means of communication a community uses is a language or a dialect. Sometimes there are languages that are used by only several people, and on the other hand there may be dialects used by thousands. Thanks to mass media, travelling and better and quicker communication, and sometimes because of political reasons, some small languages are likely to extinct, while major languages are propagated.

In many modern languages similarities can be detected in vocabulary and grammar structures. It is because they descend from common ancestors. There are approximately twenty important language families (groups). Beside there are perhaps fifty or more smaller ones. A few languages show no similarities to any other existing language. E.g. Basque seems to be resistant against any classification. The largest group of languages is the Indo-European. Half of the world's population (about 3 billion people) speak Indo-European languages.

Indo-European Languages

As mentioned above this group is the world's largest family of languages. People in Europe, Africa, America, Australia and also Asia speak Indo-European languages. In Europe only Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, Turkish, and a few languages in Russia do not belong to this family.

Thanks to historical linguistics and comparative method, which means thanks to the language reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European, we can discover who the original Indo-Europeans were. They lived in a cold region somewhere in Eastern Europe about 3000 B.C. It was probably not near the water, but among forests. They raised some domestic animals such as the cow, the horse, the sheep and the dog. They also knew the wolf and the bear. Copper was the one they knew among metals. About 2500 B.C. the people migrated in many directions. In the places they settled they overcame the former population and imposed their language upon them.

Following are the well-known Indo-European Languages: English, Welsh, Gaelic, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Latin, German, Dutch, Icelandic, Swedish, Polish, Czech, Rumanian, Albanian, Greek, Russian, Lithuanian, Armenian, Persian, and Sanskrit. These languages can be categorized into branches. Their number differs according to various linguists from 9 to 15.

Basic branches are as follows:

Germanic languages. By the 1st century B.C. Germanic nations were living on both sides of the North and Baltic seas. In these regions North, West and East Germanic dialects came into existence. The West part of the population settled between the Elbe and Oder rivers. The **West Germanic languages** evolved here: English, Flemish, Dutch (or Netherlandic), Frisian (spoken in Northern Holland) and Afrikaans (based on Dutch and spoken in South Africa and Namibia), German, and Yiddish (an offspring of German as well as Luxembourgian).

North Germanic languages include Swedish, Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Faroese (spoken in the Faroe Islands).

East Germanic languages are all extinct. Only Gothic language is preserved in manuscripts. Over 500 million people speak Germanic languages as their first language, largely because of the worldwide role of English

Romance languages (or Italic). The main language of this family is Latin. From the 'vulgar' form of Latin, that was spread all over the Roman Empire, developed the Romance languages: French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and Romanian (Rumanian). There are also some minor languages as Sardinian, Occitan (in southern France), Rhaetian (in northern Italy and Switzerland), and Catalan (in north-east Spain). Romance languages have spread as a result of colonialism. Today over 500 million people in the world speak Romance languages as their first language, including also the Creoles based on French, Spanish, or Portuguese.

Celtic languages. They are languages of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. They include Gaelic (known as Irish), Scottish Gaelic, Welsh, Breton (spoken in the North-West of France), and Manx with Cornish (both extinct). The Celtic languages are seriously endangered. Cornish died out in the 18th century, Manx (spoken in the Isle of Man) only recently. Local patriots try to encourage the teaching and speaking of Welsh, Scottish Gaelic and especially Irish Gaelic. With each passing generation the number of speakers diminishes.

Balto-Slavic. Baltic and Slavic (or Slavonic) languages are often placed together as a single branch, because of their similarities. These languages are spoken by about 300 million people (half of them speak Russian).

The main **Baltic** languages are Latvian and Lithuanian having about 4 million speakers. They are the most conservative of the Indo-European languages. They have preserved a number of archaic features. Anyway they are not mutually intelligible.

While Baltic languages are only two, **Slavonic** languages are more numerous. They are divided into three groups: **South Slavonic** includes Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbo-Croatian, and Slovene. The Serbs and the Croats speak one language; just their script is different. **East Slavonic** includes Russian, Belorussian, and Ukrainian. **West Slavonic** includes Czech, Slovak, Polish and Sorbian (in Eastern Germany). The first Slavonic language used for literary purposes was Old Church Slavonic. It was written in Cyrillic devised by the Greek missionaries Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century. Nowadays the Slavic languages use two alphabets. The choice was made entirely by religion. The Cyrillic alphabet was adopted by the Orthodox Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Bulgarians, Serbs, and Macedonians. The Roman Catholic Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Slovenes and Sorbs adopted the Latin script.

Indo-Iranian languages. This branch of languages also comprises two large groups. Indic (or Indo-Aryan) and Iranian languages. **Indic** languages are spoken in northern two thirds of India, in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. They are modern descendents of Sanskrit (the language in which the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts, are written. The earliest evidence of them comes sometimes between 5th and 7th centuries B.C.). The most important Indic languages used in India are Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, Gujarati, Oriya, and Assamese. Sinhalese is the principal language of Sri Lanka. In Nepal they speak Nepali, in Kashmir Kashmiri is used. Romany, the language of Gypsies, is also of this family. Urdu and Sindhi are written in Arabic script. The majority of others use variations of the script called Devanagari.

Iranian languages are dominated by Persian (or Farsi). Persian is spoken today by 35 million people. Others include Pashto, spoken in Pakistan and Afghanistan; Kurdish, Tadjik, Ossetian, and Baluchi (the last spoken in Pakistan and Iran). Avestan, the sacred language of the Zoroastrians, should also be mentioned. Avestan has the texts from 6th century B.C. Since 7th century A.D., since the conquest of Islam, the Iranian languages have been written in the Arabic script. Cyrillic-based alphabets were created for Tadjik and Ossetian under the Soviet government. Kurdish in the Soviet area accepted the same script. Total number of speakers by Iranian languages makes around 60 million.

Then there are branches of Indo-European languages represented by only one language:

Greek is a single language represented by many dialects. The modern varieties of Greek are spoken in Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, the United States, and other localities.

Armenian is spoken by many dialects by between 5 and 6 million people in the Armenian republic, Turkey, in parts of the Middle East, and the United States.

Anatolian is a group of languages now extinct. It was spoken in parts of present-day Turkey and Syria. Its relics are written in cuneiform writing and they come from 17th century B.C.

Tocharian is now extinct. It was spoken in the northern part of Chinese Turkistan during 1st century A.D. The name is a bit controversy as it is based on the name of Tochari people who lived further east.

Non-Indo-European Languages

In Europe some important non-Indo-European languages can be found. They are: Basque, Finnish, Hungarian and Turkish. Basque has been mentioned above. Finnish and Hungarian belong to Uralic family of languages, namely to one of the two sub-groups Finno-Ugric (The other is Samoyedic, these languages are spoken in Siberia). Turkish belongs to Altaic language family.