

Chapter Six: Language

What are Languages, and What Role do Languages Play in Cultures?

A **language** is a set of sounds, combination of sounds, and symbols that are used for communication. Moreover, language is an integral part of culture. Thus, the French go to great lengths to protect their language by banning the use of foreign words in ads and TV and by mandating French alternative words for such global terms as email (courier électronique) and hacker (pirate informatique).

The loss of a language can be devastating for a culture. Yet, many cultures have been forced to abandon their language, primarily due to colonization; the colonial power forces the conquered people to use the colonial language in school and government. An example of this would be the United States' assimilation toward Native Americans. Unfortunately, the new language can be totally different in structure so that the conquered people cannot learn it readily.

France is not alone in trying to protect its language. Many Americans fear that Spanish will erode English language usage in the United States, and some states have passed laws making English the official state language. The Canadian province of Quebec speaks French, whereas the rest of Canada speaks English. This has led to efforts by the Quebecois to pass laws to strengthen French usage and prevent the inroads of English into their province. So strong is the Quebecois identification with French that they have proposed secession on a few occasions.

Technologically advanced societies are likely to have a **standard language**, one that is published, widely distributed, and purposefully taught. This might sound obvious, but there are many variations of a particular language. Variants of a standard language along regional or ethnic lines are called **dialects**. In the US, dialects usually mean what we would more commonly call an 'accent'; Northerners and Southerners use the same words, but they may sound somewhat different. Many countries' dialects are marked by actual differences in vocabulary. A particular linguistic feature or word's range can be shown on a map, with the word's limit being called an **isogloss**. For example, the word 'coke' can generically stand for any soft drink in the South; an isogloss can be drawn to show the where the use of the work coke ends and the use of 'pop' begins.

Why Are Languages Distributed the Way They Are?

Within a **language family**, the languages have a shared but fairly distant origin. Language families are broken into subfamilies, then finally individual languages. There are 20 language families, the largest of which is the **Indo-European** language family. Within the Indo-European language, English is the most widely spoken language. The Romance languages of Spanish, French, and Italian are all languages within the Indo-European language; their similarity is noted by a **sound shift**, which is a slight change in a word across languages. The study of languages yielded the existence of a **Proto-Indo-European** language that was the hearth of ancient Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. The Proto-Indo-European language had an even further ancestor, the **Nostratic** language, thought to have been spoken as long as 14,000 years ago. Over time, **language divergence** occurs, where a lack of interaction between speakers breaks the language into dialects and then distinct languages. This has happened to Spanish and Portuguese, and is now happening with Quebecois French. **Language convergence** can also happen, causing two languages to merge, often leading to one of the languages to become **extinct**, or no longer spoken by anyone in day to day use.

Languages diffuse over time and space. The **conquest theory** holds that the Proto-Indo-European language spread due to the conquerors from the East. The **dispersal hypothesis** states that the languages were carried over time and spread through the migration of people to the East. Either way, the language spread.

Africa is the most language rich (and fragmented) area of the world. Nigeria has 100 million people and more than 400 different languages, ranging from Hausa with 35 million speakers to languages spoken by fewer than a million. This language potpourri shows two things:

1. Daily survival in Africa is tied closely to the local scale in Nigeria.
2. Most of Africa's national boundaries were drawn by European colonizers with little regard to the diverse and separate cultures within those areas.

How do Languages Diffuse?

Empires, the rise of the printing press, and worldwide trade have all allowed languages to diffuse and spread. Over time, the rise of trade resulted in new languages that would be used among speakers of many different languages as a common way to communicate. This type of language is known as a **lingua franca**. Often times, the lingua franca would be a combination of two or more of languages spoken by the trading partners. This combined language is

known as a **pidgin language**. The first widely known lingua franca was a pidgin language that combined French, Italian, Greek, Spanish, and Arabic. This mixture became known as the Frankish language (aka lingua franca); it survived for centuries among traders in the Mediterranean region. English became a lingua franca during colonial times, and Swahili is a lingua franca for Eastern Africa; most people retain their native language as the primary language, but are able to converse in Swahili. If a pidgin language becomes the first language in an area, it becomes what is called a **Creole language**. The word Creole stems from a pidgin language formed in the Caribbean from English, French, and Portuguese. Pidgin and Creole languages are still used in various places to unify linguistically divided people as the lingua franca in various parts of the world.

There are very few **monolingual states**, or countries in which only one language is spoken. They include Japan, Uruguay, Venezuela, Iceland, Denmark, Portugal, and Poland; technically though, even those countries have immigrants that speak another language. There are many **multilingual states**; most of them are due to colonialism. A couple of notable countries that are multilingual would be Canada (French and English), and Belgium (Flemish and French).

Countries with linguistic fragmentation often adopt an **official language** to tie the people together. Many former colonies in Africa have adopted French, Portuguese, or English as their official languages. Some countries even have two official languages, such as India in which English and Hindi are spoken.

If there was to be a **global language**, or one that is used around the world as a common language of trade and commerce, **English** would be it. While the world will not be all-embracing of English necessarily, English does seem to be the lingua franca of business, travel, and most recently computing. International pilots communicate in English, Danish tourists visiting Italy would probably use English to get around. More than a billion and a half people around the world are at least somewhat conversant in English.

What Role Does Language Play in Making Places?

Geographers call place names **toponyms**. A toponym can give a quick glimpse into the history or character of a place. They can be descriptive (Rocky Mountains); they can be commemorative (San Francisco); they can reveal the dominant culture of the first inhabitants (Baton Rouge, LA). Brazil, though predominantly Portuguese in legacy, has several German toponyms; this can be explained by the fact that there are several German settlements among those settled by the Portuguese.

Sometimes toponyms can change to reflect the cultural preferences of an area. For example, in Wales (part of Great Britain), resentment of English names taking the place of historic Welsh names caused a movement to rename Welsh cities with their Welsh names; an example would be Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogoch. Sometimes toponyms can reflect a nationalist desire to get away from names imposed by colonial powers; an example would be the Gold Coast changing its name to Ghana. The Congo became Zaire. People can change a toponym to memorialize somebody; for example, 8th Avenue in Nashville became Rosa L Parks Ave. They can also change toponyms in an effort to correct past conflicts, such as removing Confederate names from parks and schools.