

According to Ethnologue, a printed and online reference that catalogs all the known living languages and is regarded as the most comprehensive and authoritative listing of world languages, there are more than 7,000 living languages in the world today. Even though the current edition of Ethnologue provides an exact number – 7,299 languages (listed under no less than 39,491 distinct names) – such a number can be only an approximation, because languages come and go. Unfortunately, they more often go than come.

Interestingly, even though the number of languages that become extinct every year is alarmingly high, the number of languages known to us is growing every year because research keeps identifying new languages that were either unknown to us in the past or were previously considered dialects. Because of this, the absolute number of languages cannot be determined, just as we cannot determine the absolute number of people living on Earth.

One of the difficulties in determining the number of languages

*“You have a new life for every
language you speak.”
-Czech proverb*

7,299 Languages And Counting

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is the ambiguity of the concept of “language” itself – language cannot be defined purely on linguistic grounds, because social, cultural, or political factors also play a role in determining what constitutes a language. Take, for example, the case of Serbo-Croatian, which was one of the official languages of Yugoslavia from 1918 to 1991. This language does not exist any longer, as it was split into three: Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. While the three variants are nearly identical in their lexicon, they use different alphabets and are divided along political and cultural lines.

The Ethnologue applies the following criteria in determining what constitutes a “language” as opposed to a “dialect:”

- Two related varieties are normally considered varieties of the same language if speakers of each variety have inherent understanding of the other variety at a functional level (that is, can understand based on knowledge of their own variety without needing to learn the other variety).
- Where spoken intelligibility between varieties is marginal, the existence of a common literature or of a common ethnolinguistic identity with a central variety that both understand can be a strong indicator that they should nevertheless be considered varieties of the same language.
- Where there is enough intelligibility between varieties to enable communication, the existence of well-established distinct ethnolinguistic identities can be a strong indicator that they should nevertheless be considered to be different languages.

Note the lack of clear distinction in each of the bullet points above: “normally considered,” “can be a strong indicator” and “should nevertheless be considered” are really just general guidelines rather than defining criteria.

According to Wikipedia, there are no universally accepted criteria for distinguishing languages from dialects. Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich proclaimed that a “language is a dialect with an army and navy.” The aphorism illustrates the fact that the political status of the speakers influences the perceived status of their language or dialect. Dialect, on the other hand, is a variety of a language that is characteristic of a particular group of the language’s speakers, and is typically distinguished by its vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation.

Consider the language – or is it a dialect? – in which this article is written. English is a language, whereas American English is what is known as a standard dialect of the English language. To compound the problem, dialects can be standard or non-standard. If read aloud in southern drawl, the article will be in non-standard southern American dialect. Like a standard dialect, non-standard dialect has a complete vocabulary,



grammar, and syntax, but does not receive institutional support.

The United States has long been considered a melting pot (or salad bowl) and therefore home to many languages. To most people it comes as a surprise that while in our country there are 311 documented languages – 162 “indigenous” (think American Indians) and 149 “immigrant” (think the author of this article whose native language is Czech) - our ranking is quite low compared to other countries. Papua New Guinea, which has approximately same number of people as the state of Maryland, is home to no less than 820 languages, all indigenous. In Indonesia, 742 languages are spoken and in Nigeria 516. Our neighbors in Mexico have more indigenous languages than the U.S. mainland. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Haiti with two indigenous and no immigrant languages, and, looking at major economies, South Korea with four indigenous and two immigrant languages.

Another surprise is the number of languages spoken in Europe. To Americans, Europe seems like a linguistic minefield with each country speaking a different language (or two or three or four). Yet Europe ranks dead last with 239 languages (or less than 4% of the world’s languages), compared to Africa and Asia with more than 2,000 languages each, or even the Americas with about 1,000 languages.

Then there are the “big” and the “small” languages. It turns out that about 350, or approximately 5%, of the world’s languages have at least one million speakers and account for 94% of the world’s population. The following languages are spoken by more than 100 million people each (includes native and second language speakers): Chinese, English, Hindi/Urdu, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, Bengali, Portuguese, Indonesian, German, Japanese and French. These languages account for more than 60% of the Earth’s population.

By contrast, the remaining 95% of languages are spoken by only 6% of the world’s people. More than 500 of the languages

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Start A New Life By Learning Another Language

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listed in the Ethnologue are classified as nearly extinct. They are classified in this way when “only a few elderly speakers are still living.” SIL International (initially known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics) studies, documents, and assists in developing the world’s lesser-known languages. According to the linguists at SIL International, of the more than 7,000 languages in the world, half may be in danger of disappearing in the next several decades. In some areas, language communities have been so ravaged by warfare or disease that entire language groups are dying out. Other languages are dying because parents are teaching their children English or French or Spanish for economic reasons.


The greatest number of endangered languages is in the Pacific region, closely followed by the Americas. In the Americas, the list is most extensive here in the United States. For example, there are fewer than 20 speakers of Cahuilla, an American Indian language spoken in Southern California, San Geronimo Pass and Mohave Desert areas. Speakers of Cahuilla shifted to English, as is the case with many other American Indian languages. The Ethnologue lists about 70 languages that are close to extinction in the United States. About 80 languages that have already disappeared in the United States are listed in Wikipedia. These are not necessarily American Indian languages. Jersey Dutch, a variant of the Dutch language spoken in and around Bergen and Passaic counties in New Jersey from the late 1600s until the early 20th century, is now extinct, as is Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language, once widely used on the island of Martha’s Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts, from the early 18th century to the mid 20th century.

Speaking of sign languages, the Ethnologue lists 121 of them, ranging from Adamorobe Sign Language spoken in Ghana to Zimbabwe Sign Language. A sign language (sometimes



also called signed language) is a language which uses manual communication, body language and lip patterns instead of sound to convey meaning. Sign languages commonly develop in deaf communities, which can include interpreters and friends and families of deaf people as well as people who are deaf or hard of hearing themselves. American Sign Language (also known as ASL or Ameslan) is familiar to most of us. It has an estimated 100,000 to 500,000 primary users out of nearly 2,000,000 deaf persons in the U.S. (about 0.8% of the U.S. population), and is also used in varying degrees in Benin, Canada, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Madagascar, Mauritania, Kenya, Nigeria, Philippines, Togo, Singapore and Zimbabwe.

Another non-spoken language is Silbo, which is whistled and can be heard more than two miles away. It is used on Spain’s Canary Islands off West Africa. Silbo – the word comes from Spanish verb silbar, meaning to whistle – features four “vowels” and four “consonants” that can be strung together to form more than 4,000 words. Since 1999, Silbo has been a required language in local elementary schools.

Seven thousand languages is a lot. The communication hurdle posed by this number is considerable. However, this inconvenience is by far outweighed by the cultural richness of our civilization. If we all spoke the same language, things would be outright boring. When we learn a new language, we learn a new way to perceive and experience the world. According to a Czech proverb, “The number of languages you know - that many times you are a person,” or “You live a new life for every new language you speak.” Just imagine the potential! 

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