

# CHAPTER 8: A GEOGRAPHY OF LANGUAGES

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- I. Introduction
  - A. Language is at the heart of culture
    1. Without language, culture could not be transmitted
    2. Cultures of all sizes fiercely protect their language
    3. In 1975, France banned the use of foreign words in advertisements, television and radio broadcasts, and official documents
    4. Pre-literate societies—those without a written language—do not accrue a time-spanning literature to serve as a foundation for ethnic preservation
    5. Linguists estimate between 5,000 and 6,000 languages are in use today
    6. Research is reconstructing the paths of *linguistic diversification* and throwing new light on ancient migrations
  - II. Defining language
    - A. Language defined—a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, gestures, marks, or especially articulate vocal sounds
      1. Vocalization is the crucial part of the definition
      2. Animals use symbolic calls, but only humans have developed complex vocal communication systems
      3. Potential vocabulary of any language is infinite
      4. Languages change continuously
    - B. Standard language
      1. Sets the quality, which is a matter of cultural identity and national concern
      2. May be sustained by official state examination of teachers, officials, etc.
      3. People with regional influence and power decide what the standard language will be
      4. Example of China
    - C. Dialects
      1. Variants of the standard language
      2. Regional accents can reveal the home of a person
      3. Dialects often marked by actual differences in vocabulary
      4. An isogloss is a transition zone surrounding a particular linguistic feature (Figure 8-1)
  - III. Classification and distribution of languages
    - A. Classification
      1. The issue of what is a language, and what is a dialect
      2. Actual number of languages used on Earth is still a debate
      3. Most linguistic geographers today recognize between 5000 and 6000 languages
      4. Most linguistic geographers recognize more than 600 discrete languages in India, and more than 1,000 in Africa
      5. *Language families* are thought to have a shared, but fairly distant origin
      6. In *language subfamilies* their commonality is more definite
      7. Subfamilies are divided into *language groups* that consist of sets of individual languages
    - B. Distribution
      1. Figure 8-2 shows the distribution of the 20 principal Indo-European language families
      2. Greater detail of the subfamilies in Europe is shown in Figure 8-3
      3. Spatially, the Indo-European language is the world's most widely dispersed

4. Indo-European languages are spoken by about half the world's population
5. Geolinguists theorize that a lost language they call Proto-Indo-European existed somewhere in the vicinity of the Black Sea or east-central Europe

#### IV. The major world languages

##### A. Introduction

1. Chinese spoken by more people than any other language (Table 8-1)
2. English ranks second; it is also a second language of hundreds of millions
3. Sub-Saharan African languages are not major languages because of fragmentation (Figure 8-2)
4. Language family of Madagascar
  - a) Long ago settled by seafarers from islands of Southeast Asia
  - b) Predominant languages belong to the Malay-Polynesian family
  - c) Difference between place names on Madagascar and Africa reveals a piece of

##### B. Languages of Europe discussion of Figure 8-3

1. Indo-European language prevails
2. Linguistic and political maps show high correlation between languages spoken and political organization of space
3. Romance languages dominate in five countries
4. Eastern boundaries of Germany coincide almost exactly with the transition from Germanic to Slavic tongues
5. Believed Ural-Altai languages spread into Europe between 7000 and 10,000 years ago

##### C. Languages of India (Figure 8-4)

1. Four language families
2. Only the Indo-European and Dravidian families have significant numbers of speakers
3. Indians speak about 15 major languages; all but four are Indo-European
4. Dravidian languages are clustered, and there is no certainty about their origin
5. Close relationship between regional languages and political divisions
6. Hindi is the principal Indo-European language with about 366 million speakers
7. The Indian language mosaic is not as intensely fragmented as the African

##### D. Languages of Africa

1. Most are unwritten
2. Grouped into four families (Figure 8-5)
3. The largest is the Niger-Congo family
4. The oldest are the Khoisan languages
5. If people of a large region speak languages that are somewhat different but still closely related, it is reasonable to conclude they migrated into that region relatively recently
6. Languages with a common root but very different from each other indicate long-term modification
7. Discussion of the Bantu languages

##### E. Chinese: One language or many? (Figure 8-6)

1. One of the world's oldest
2. Spoken by the greatest contiguous population cluster on Earth
3. Divided by dialects that are mutually unintelligible
  - a) Mandarin dominates with about 700 million speakers
  - b) Wu Chinese has more than 100 million speakers
  - c) Yue (Cantonese) has about 70 million speakers
4. Some scholars argue that Chinese is not one but several languages
5. Several efforts have been made to create a truly national language

