

Languages of the World: How We Communicate

People around the world speak in many different ways. Today, humans use about 7,000 languages across every **continent**. Some languages have millions of speakers, like Mandarin, English, and Spanish. Other languages are spoken by only a small community in one village. Each language carries the history and **identity** of its people. When a language disappears, the world loses more than words, it loses a unique way of seeing life. Scientists who study language, called **linguists**, work hard to record these different voices before they **vanish**. Learning about this **variety** helps us understand how connected, yet how different, human communities truly are.

Many languages belong to families, or groups of languages that share a common **ancestor**. English belongs to the Indo-European family, along with Spanish, Hindi, and Russian. Even though these languages sound different today, they **evolved** from an older language spoken thousands of years ago. Other families include the Sino-Tibetan family, which includes Mandarin, and the Niger-Congo family, found across much of Africa. Scientists compare grammar, sound, and vocabulary to **trace** how languages split apart through **migration** and time. Every language holds **clues** about the journey of its speakers. These family ties remind us that no language grew completely on its own, separate from every other tongue.

More than half of the people on Earth speak two or more languages every day. Growing up **bilingual**, or speaking two languages well, can shape how the brain works. Studies suggest that people who know several languages may switch between tasks more easily and stay mentally **sharp** longer as they age. In many countries, children start learning a second language **fluently** by practicing every day in elementary school. Others pick up new languages naturally, simply by living in **diverse** neighborhoods filled with different cultures. Whatever the method, learning another language opens a door to new friendships and **opportunities** that a single language could never fully offer.

Sadly, many languages are now **endangered**, meaning they have very few remaining speakers. Experts estimate that nearly half of all languages spoken today could disappear by the end of this century. This often happens when younger generations shift to a more **dominant** language for school, work, or media. Once the last fluent speaker passes away, a language can disappear forever, along with songs, stories, and traditional knowledge. Communities around the globe are now working to **preserve** these languages. Volunteers record elders speaking, create dictionaries, and teach classes so future generations can reconnect with their **heritage** before it can **fade** away.

Not all communication uses spoken words. Sign languages, used by Deaf communities worldwide, **rely** on hand shapes, facial expressions, and movement to share meaning. There are more than 300 different sign languages, each with its own **grammar** and vocabulary, separate from the spoken language of the same country. American Sign Language, for example, is very different from British Sign Language, even though both countries speak English. Body language, **gestures**, and tone of voice also play a huge role in daily conversation. Scientists estimate that a large **portion** of communication happens without saying a single word, showing that language is much bigger than speech **alone**.

Technology is changing the way people communicate across languages. Translation apps can now turn spoken words into another language in seconds, helping travelers, students, and businesses connect **instantly**. Artificial intelligence is also helping researchers analyze rare languages, predict grammar patterns, and even help **revive** languages that are nearly extinct. However, technology cannot fully

capture the emotion, humor, or culture hidden inside a language. Many experts believe that human connection, not machines, will always remain **essential** for truly understanding another culture. As tools continue to improve, they may help protect many voices instead of **erasing** them completely.

Beyond the Headlines

Here's a **surprising** fact: Papua New Guinea, a country with only about 10 million people, is home to more than 840 languages, more than any other nation on Earth! Scientists believe this **incredible** number exists because of the country's **rugged** mountains and **isolated** valleys, which kept small communities separated for centuries. Without roads connecting them, each group developed its own unique way of speaking. Some of these languages are used by just a few hundred people. This tiny country proves that **geography** can shape culture just as powerfully as history does, creating one of the richest collections of human speech anywhere in the world.

Vocabulary

Paragraph 1

continent (n.)	(n.) One of the seven very large areas of land on Earth. <i>“Africa is a large continent with many countries.”</i>
identity (n.)	(n.) Who a person or group is, including their culture and history. <i>“Language is a big part of a person’s identity.”</i>
linguists (n.)	(n.) Scientists who study languages. <i>“The linguists traveled to a small village to record an old language.”</i>
vanish (v.)	(v.) To disappear completely. <i>“Some languages vanish when no one speaks them anymore.”</i>
variety (n.)	(n.) Many different types of something. <i>“There is a huge variety of languages spoken around the world.”</i>

Paragraph 2

ancestor (n.)	(n.) A person, thing, or language that an animal, person, or language developed from. <i>“Latin is the ancestor of Spanish and Italian.”</i>
evolved (v.)	(v.) Changed and developed slowly over time. <i>“Language has evolved a great deal over thousands of years.”</i>
trace (v.)	(v.) To follow the signs of something back to its start. <i>“Scientists trace how languages changed over centuries.”</i>
migration (n.)	(n.) The movement of people from one place to live in another. <i>“Migration helped spread languages to new regions.”</i>
clues (n.)	(n.) Small pieces of information that help solve a mystery. <i>“Old words give clues about a language’s history.”</i>

Paragraph 3

bilingual (adj.)	(adj.) Able to speak two languages well. <i>“Growing up bilingual can shape how the brain works.”</i>
sharp (adj.)	(adj.) Quick and clear in thinking. <i>“Staying sharp mentally can help people as they age.”</i>
fluently (adv.)	(adv.) In a smooth, natural way, without stopping to think. <i>“She speaks three languages fluently.”</i>
diverse (adj.)	(adj.) Including many different types of people or things. <i>“The city has many diverse neighborhoods.”</i>
opportunities (n.)	(n.) Good chances to do something useful or enjoyable. <i>“Learning a language opens new opportunities.”</i>

Paragraph 4

endangered (adj.)	(adj.) At risk of disappearing completely. <i>“The panda is an endangered animal, and so are many languages.”</i>
dominant (adj.)	(adj.) More powerful or common than others. <i>“English is the dominant language in many businesses today.”</i>

preserve (v.)	(v.) To protect something so it does not disappear or get damaged. <i>"Volunteers work to preserve old languages."</i>
heritage (n.)	(n.) Traditions, language, and history passed down from earlier generations. <i>"Speaking her grandmother's language connects her to her heritage."</i>
fade (v.)	(v.) To slowly disappear or become weaker. <i>"Without new speakers, a language can fade away."</i>

Paragraph 5

rely (v.)	(v.) To depend on something or someone. <i>"Sign languages rely on hand movements instead of sound."</i>
grammar (n.)	(n.) The rules of a language that explain how to form sentences. <i>"Every sign language has its own grammar."</i>
gestures (n.)	(n.) Movements of the hands or body used to express meaning. <i>"She used gestures to explain what she wanted."</i>
portion (n.)	(n.) A part or share of something larger. <i>"A large portion of what we communicate is not spoken."</i>
alone (adv.)	(adv.) By itself, without anything else. <i>"Words alone cannot always explain how someone feels."</i>

Paragraph 6

instantly (adv.)	(adv.) Immediately, without any delay. <i>"The app translated her words instantly."</i>
revive (v.)	(v.) To bring something back to life or use again. <i>"Scientists are working to revive languages that almost disappeared."</i>
capture (v.)	(v.) To successfully show or record something. <i>"A translation app cannot always capture the true feeling of a sentence."</i>
essential (adj.)	(adj.) Extremely important and necessary. <i>"Human connection is essential for understanding another culture."</i>
erasing (v.)	(v.) Removing something completely, so it no longer exists. <i>"New technology can help save languages instead of erasing them completely."</i>

Beyond the Headlines

surprising (adj.)	(adj.) Unexpected and interesting. <i>"It is surprising how many languages exist in the world."</i>
incredible (adj.)	(adj.) Very hard to believe; amazing. <i>"Eight hundred forty languages in one country is an incredible number."</i>
rugged (adj.)	(adj.) Rough, rocky, and difficult to travel across. <i>"The rugged mountains kept villages separate from each other."</i>
isolated (adj.)	(adj.) Far away and alone, without much contact with others. <i>"People in isolated valleys developed their own languages."</i>
geography (n.)	(n.) The physical features of a place, like mountains, rivers, and land. <i>"Geography can affect how many languages a country has."</i>

Language Review

Exercise A — True or False

Read each statement. Write True or False on the line.

1. There are about 7,000 languages spoken in the world today. _____
2. English belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. _____
3. More than half of the people on Earth speak two or more languages. _____
4. Nearly half of all languages could disappear by the end of this century. _____
5. American Sign Language and British Sign Language are the same language.

6. There are more than 1,000 different sign languages in the world. _____
7. Technology can fully capture the emotion and humor inside a language. _____
8. Papua New Guinea has more languages than any other country in the world.

Exercise B — Matching

Match each word in Column A with its meaning in Column B. Write the correct letter.

Column A	Column B
1. linguists	a. bring back to life or use again
2. ancestor	b. able to speak two languages well
3. bilingual	c. traditions and history passed down from the past
4. endangered	d. a person or language from long ago that others come from
5. gestures	e. far away and separate from others
6. revive	f. movements of the hands or body that show meaning
7. isolated	g. scientists who study language
8. heritage	h. at risk of disappearing

Exercise C — Multiple Choice

Choose the best answer (a, b, c, or d) for each question.

1. About how many languages do people speak around the world today?
 - a. About 7,000
 - b. About 1,000
 - c. About 100

- d. About 20,000
2. What is a language family?
 - a. A dictionary of a language
 - b. A group of languages that share a common ancestor
 - c. A country with many languages
 - d. A group of people who speak the same language
 3. Why might people who speak several languages benefit mentally?
 - a. They forget their first language
 - b. They avoid learning grammar
 - c. They may switch between tasks more easily
 - d. They learn every language perfectly
 4. What often causes a language to become endangered?
 - a. Too many people learning it
 - b. Governments banning translation apps
 - c. Scientists writing dictionaries
 - d. Younger generations shifting to a more dominant language
 5. What do sign languages rely on to share meaning?
 - a. Hand shapes, facial expressions, and movement
 - b. Written words only
 - c. Musical instruments
 - d. Sound alone
 6. How is American Sign Language related to British Sign Language?
 - a. They are the same language
 - b. They are very different, even though both countries speak English
 - c. ASL came directly from BSL
 - d. Neither language uses grammar
 7. According to the article, what can technology NOT fully capture?
 - a. Vocabulary lists
 - b. Translation speed
 - c. Emotion, humor, and culture inside a language
 - d. Grammar patterns
 8. Why does Papua New Guinea have so many languages?
 - a. Its large population
 - b. Its many universities
 - c. Its long history of immigration
 - d. Its rugged mountains and isolated valleys

Exercise D — Discussion Questions

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. How many languages do you speak? What made you want to learn them?
2. Why do you think some languages have millions of speakers while others have only a few hundred?
3. Do you think schools should teach a second language starting in elementary school? Why or why not?
4. How do people communicate without words in your own culture?
5. If you could learn any new language, which one would you choose, and why?