

Non-native speakers of English far outnumber those for whom English is the first language. Most of the more than 1 billion people who speak and understand at least some English as a second language live in Asia; they are appropriating the language and remaking it in regionally distinctive fashions, to suit their own cultures, linguistic backgrounds, and needs.

It is inevitable that widely spoken languages separated by distance, isolation, and cultural differences will fragment into dialects that, in turn, evolve into new languages. Latin splintered into French, Spanish, Italian, and other Romance languages; the many national variants of spoken Arabic are effectively different tongues. English is similarly experiencing that sort of regional differentiation, shaped by the variant needs and inputs of its far-flung community of speakers, and following the same path to mutual unintelligibility. Although Standard English may be one of or the sole official language of their countries of birth, millions of people around the world claiming proficiency in English or English as their national language cannot understand each other. Even teachers of English from India, Malaya, Nigeria, or the Philippines, for example, may not be able to communicate in their supposedly common tongue—and find cockney English of London utterly alien.

The splintering of spoken English is a fact of linguistic life and its offspring—called “World Englishes” by linguists—defy

frequent attempts by different governments to remove localisms and encourage adherence to international standards. Singlish (Singapore English) and Taglish (a mixture of English and Tagalog, the dominant language of the Philippines) are commonly cited examples of the multiplying World Englishes, but equally distinctive regional variants have emerged in India, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Nigeria, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. One linguist suggests that beyond an “inner circle” of states where English is the first and native language—for example, Canada, Australia, United States—lies an “outer circle” where English is a second language (Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Kenya, Pakistan, Zambia, and many others) and where the regionally distinctive World Englishes are most obviously developing. Even farther out is an “expanding circle” of such states as China, Egypt, Korea, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, and others where English is a foreign language and distinctive local variants in common usage have not yet developed.

Each of the emerging varieties of English is, of course, “correct,” for each represents a coherent and consistent vehicle for communication with mutual comprehension between its speakers. Each also represents a growing national cultural confidence and pride in the particular characteristics of the local varieties of English, and each regional variant is strengthened by local teachers who do not themselves have a good command of the standard language. Conceivably, these factors

may mean that English will fragment into scores or hundreds of mutually unintelligible tongues. But equally conceivably, the worldwide influence of globalized business contacts, the Internet, worldwide American radio and television broadcasts, near-mandatory use of English in scientific publication, and the like will mean a future English more homogeneous and, perhaps, more influenced and standardized by American usage.

Most likely, observers of World Englishes suggest, both divergence and convergence will take place. While use of English as the major language of communication worldwide is a fact in international politics, business, education, and the media, increasingly, speakers of English learn two “dialects”—one of their own community and culture and one in the international context. While the constant modern world electronic and literary interaction between the variant regional Englishes make it likely that the common language will remain universally intelligible, it also seems probable that mutually incomprehensible forms of English will become entrenched as the language is taught, learned, and used in world areas far removed from contact with first-language speakers and with vibrant local economies and cultures independent of the Standard English community. “Our only revenge,” said a French official, deploring the declining role of French within the European Union, “is that the English language is being killed by all these foreigners speaking it so badly.”

Language and Cultural Survival

As Figure 4.11 shows, almost 40 percent of the world’s nearly extinct languages are found in the Americas. They represent a wealth of Native American languages that are slowly becoming suffocated by English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Keith Basso, an anthropologist who has written an intriguing book titled *Wisdom Sits in Places*, discusses the landscape of distinctive place-names used by the Western Apache of New Mexico. The people Basso studied use place-names to invoke stories that help the Western Apache remember their collective history. According to Nick Thompson, one of Basso’s interviewees, “White men need paper maps. . . . We have maps in our minds” (p. 43). Thompson goes on to assert that calling up the names of places can guard against forgetting the correct way of living, or adopting the bad habits of white men, once Western Apaches move to other areas. “The names of all these places are good. They make you remember how to live right, so you want to replace yourself again” (p. 59).

One of the places Basso heard about is called Shades of Shit. Here is what he was told:

It happened here at Shades of Shit.

They had much corn, those people who lived here, and their relatives had only a little. They refused to share it. Their relatives begged them but still they refused to share it.

Then their relatives got angry and forced them to stay at home. They wouldn’t let them go anywhere, not even to defecate. So they had to do it at home. Their shades [shelters] filled up with it. There was more and more of it! It was very bad! Those people got sick and nearly died.

Then their relatives said, “You have brought this on yourselves. Now you live in shades of shit!” Finally, they agreed to share their corn.

It happened at Shades of Shit. (p. 24)

Today, merely standing at this place or speaking its graphic name reminds Western Apache that stinginess is a vice that can threaten the survival of the entire community.

Language and Ethnicity in Africa

The geography of languages in Africa is remarkably complex, with more than 800 living languages, 40 of them spoken by more than 1 million people (Figure 5.F). The dominant indigenous languages, spoken by 10 million or more, are Hausa (the Sahel), Lingala (Central Africa), Swahili (East Africa), and Tswana-Sotho and Zulu (southern Africa). Hausa and Swahili are trade languages, spoken as second languages by many groups to facilitate trade. English,

French, Portuguese, and Afrikaans are also spoken in regions of recent colonial control and education systems or white settlement, and Arabic is common in north Africa. Arabic has strongly influenced Swahili along the east coast of Africa. Because most countries have no dominant indigenous African language, they have often chosen a European language for official business and school systems. The countries with the most coherent overlap between their territory and a dominant African language are Somalia (Somali), Botswana (Tswana), and Ethiopia (Amharic).

The indigenous languages of Africa have been grouped into larger language families, including the Afro-Asiatic languages of north Africa, including Somali, Amharic, and Tuareg; the Nilo-Saharan languages, which include Dinka, Turkana, and Nuer in East Africa; and the largest Niger-Congo group, which includes Hausa, Yoruba, Zulu, Swahili, and Kikuyu. A small family are the Khoisan languages spoken by the Bushmen of southern Africa, which have a distinctive "click" vocalization.

The multiplicity of languages and dialects reflects the large number of distinct cultural or ethnic groups in Africa. Groups are often led by chiefs, and some are monarchies with kings or queens. The largest ethnic groups in Africa are associated with certain dominant languages, such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Zulu, but almost all groups, however large or small, were either split geographically by colonial national boundaries or grouped with neighbors with whom they may have had no affinity.

Attempts to consolidate ethnic groups across boundaries and struggles for power between groups within countries are a major cause of conflict in contemporary Africa. For example, tensions between the Ibo and Yoruba in Nigeria led to civil war when the Ibo declared the independence of eastern Nigeria as Biafra in 1967. The conflict, which drew international attention and intervention because of starvation in Biafra and the presence of oil in the region, resulted in as many as a million deaths (mainly from hunger and disease) and lingering ethnic resentments after Nigeria was reunited. Another evident tension is between the ruling Kikuyu and other ethnic groups in Kenya, where opposition political parties have organized around ethnicity and threaten violence in the face of perceived election corruption and bias toward Kikuyu regions and individuals.

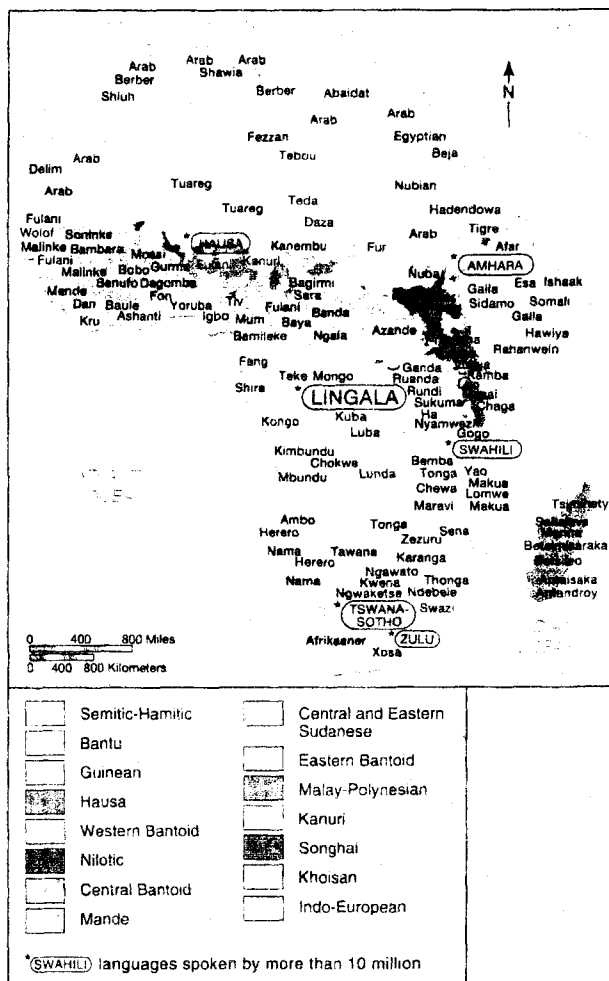


Figure 5.F Language map of Africa The cultural complexity of Africa is clearly demonstrated in the variety of indigenous languages shown in this map. Swahili and Hausa are spoken by millions as the trade languages of East and West Africa, respectively. (After S. Aryeetey-Attoh (ed.), *The Geography of Sub-Saharan Africa*.)