**Chapter 5: Languages**

**Key Issue 1: Where Are Languages Distributed?**

**Language** is a system of communication through speech, a collection of sounds that a group of people understands to have the same meaning.Language is an important element of culture that people value. Beginning an analysis of the geographic elements of cultural values with language is useful because it is the medium through which other cultural values, such as religion and ethnicity, are communicated.

**Introducing Languages** Most people in the United States only know how to speak English. Only   
8 percent of college students and 18 percent of high school students take foreign language courses in the United States, whereas in Europe, 75 percent of elementary school students and 94 percent of high school students learn English in addition to their native languages.

**Language and Migration** Language and migration are geographic areas of interest that share many connections. For instance, the contemporary distribution of languages across Earth can be attributed to the past migrations of peoples. An example in the world can be seen in Madagascar, where the native language is a part of the same language family as languages spoken in Indonesia and the Philippines. According to researchers, migrants traveled to Madagascar from Indonesia about 2,000 years ago. The common language between the two populations diverged as contact was lost, and the Malagasy language developed into a distinct language over the course of many generations. Geographers analyze the similarities among languages to explain the diffusion and interaction of people around the world.

**Classifying Languages** Earth’s cultural diversity is readily apparent through the collection of languages spread across its continents. According to *Ethnologue*, one of the most authoritative sources of languages (see: ethnnologue.com), there are an estimated 7,102 languages, including 90 spoken by at least 10 million people, 304 spoken by between 1 and 10 million people, and 6,708 spoken by fewer than 1 million people. The distribution of some languages is easy for geographers to determine, while others (especially in Africa and Asia) can be difficult (or perhaps even impossible). Ethnologue categorizes languages into five classes: institutional, developing, vigorous, in trouble, and dying. Of the world’s 7,102 languages, 578 are institutional, 1,598 are developing, 2,479 are vigorous, 1,531 are in trouble, and 916 are dying.

An **institutional language** is a language used in education, work, mass media, and government. The **official language** of a country is a designated institutional language, used by the government for laws, reports, and public objects such as road signs, money, and stamps. Many countries have more than one official language and may require all public documents to be in all languages. A **literary tradition** is a component of a(n) (institutional) language, meaning that a written system exists alongside the spoken system. While thousands of literary traditions existing in the world help geographers study the total number and distribution of languages in the world, languages with no written system present problems for researchers trying to examine them.

A **developing language** is spoken daily by people of all ages in a population. While the spoken system of a developing language may be relatively widespread, a literary tradition may not be as widely distributed. A **vigorous language** is spoken daily by people of all ages in a population, but has no literary tradition at all. As their names imply, languages in trouble and dying are considered by Ethnologue to be in various phases of disappearing from use.

**Organizing Language Families** Languages can be organized into families, branches, and groups. A **language family** is a collection of languages related through a common ancestral language that existed long before recorded history. A **language branch** exists within a family, comprising a collection of languages that are related through a common ancestral language that existed several thousand years ago. The connections between languages in a branch can be seen in archaeological evidence. A **language group** is a collection of languages within a branch that share a common origin in the relatively recent past and exhibit many similarities in grammar and vocabulary.

**Language Families** Figure 5-3 is illustrative of the divisions and relationships that exist between language families, branches, groups, and individual languages. Each language family is displayed as an individual tree at ground level, as differences between families predate recorded history. Some linguists have speculated that current conceptualizations of language families descend from larger superfamilies, circa tens of thousands of years ago. Quentin Atkinson, a New Zealander biologist, posits that all languages originate in Africa, attributing this to the complexity and diversity of languages present in Africa today. According to *Ethnologue*, there are 142 language families. Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan are the two language families used by the most people today, by about 1 billion people. Additionally, 7 language families are used by between 100 million and 500 million people, and 5 language families are used by between 9 and 100 million people.

**Two Largest Language Families** Figure 5-6 displays language families with at least 9 million native speakers across the globe. The two language families with the most speakers are Indo-European and Sino-Tibetan, spoken by about 1 billion people.

**Indo-European** Indo-European is the most extensively used language family, evidenced by its predominant usage in Europe, South Asia, and North and Latin America. Four branches of Indo-European are widely used (Indo-Iranian, Germanic, Romance, and Balto-Slavic), while four other branches are spoken by relatively fewer people (Albanian, Armenian, Celtic, and Greek).

**Sino-Tibetan** Sino-Tibetan is the second-largest language family in the world as it includes Mandarin (known by the Chinese as *Putonghua*, or “common speech”), the world’s single most-spoken language. The languages of China generally are a part of the Sinitic branch of the Sino-Tibetan family. Although other Sinitic branch languages are spoken by at least 20 million each in China, the People’s Republic of China government has imposed Mandarin across the country as its official language.

**Other Large Language Families** 12 other language families and their distribution are discussed in the following sections.

**Southeast Asia Language Families** The three largest language families present in Southeast Asia are Austronesian, Austro-Asiatic, and Tai-Kadai

**Austronesian** Approximately6 percent of the world’s population speaks languages of the Austronesian family, with most speakers concentrated in Indonesia. As Indonesia is composed of several thousand different islands, many distinct languages and dialects can be found across the country – according to *Ethnologue*, 706 living languages are spoken in Indonesia. The most spoken first language in Indonesia is Javanese, spoken by 84 percent of the population (mostly on the island of Java).

**Austro-Asiatic** The Austro-Asiatic language family is used by approximately 2 percent of the world’s population, with Vietnamese being the most widely used language in the family. Written Vietnamese features a roman alphabet, a vestige of Roman Catholic missionaries work in the country in the seventeenth century.

**Tai-Kadai** The Tai-Kadai family was once categorized as a branch of Sino-Tibertan. The primary languages of this family are spoken in Thailand and adjacent areas of China. Some scholars believe that populations speaking Tai-Kadai languages may have migrated from the Philippines.

**East Asia Language Families** Japanese and Korean are the two most commonly used language families in Asia, excluding those in China.

**Japanese** Written in part with Chinese characters, Japanese also uses two systems of phonetic symbols, used either in place of Chinese characters or alongside them. While the original form of writing Japanese was influenced by the Chinese writing system, the two languages are structurally distinct.

**Korean** The Korean written system, known as *hankul*, is distinct from Japanese and Sino-Tibetan languages in that each letter represents a sound, as in Western languages. A majority of Korean vocabulary originated from Chinese words.

**Other Asian Language Families** In South Asia, the Dravidian language family is predominately used. The Altaic and Uralic language families were originally conceived to be one language family; however, recent studies have determined that they have disparate geographic beginnings.

**Dravidian** Dravidian languages are spoken primarily in southern India. Telugu and Tamil are the two most commonly used Dravidian languages. Dravidian is less studied than other widely used language families, and was present in South Asia prior to the arrival of speakers of Indo-European.

**Altaic** The Altaic languages are theorized to have emerged from the steppe areas bordering the Qilian Shan and Altai mountains between Tibet and China. Turkish is the most commonly used Altaic language. After the Soviet Union took control of Central Asia in the mid-twentieth century, the use of Altaic languages was suppressed. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the countries of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan adopted Altaic languages as their national tongues.

**Uralic** The Uralic languages originated from a common language spoken by people in the Ural Mountains region of Russia. Dating back some 7,000 years, Estonians, Finns, and Hungarians all use the Uralic language family.

**African Language Families** There is a dispute among language scholars regarding the categorization of African languages into families – as a matter of fact, scholars cannot even concede on the exact number of languages used in Africa (*Ethnologue* describes 2,146 languages in Africa, with only 699 having a literary tradition). Africa is home to the world’s third- and fourth-largest language families: Afro-Asiatic in North Africa and Niger-Congo in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Afro-Asiatic** Arabic is the primary Afro-Asiatic family language, with 206 million people speaking it as an official language across two dozen countries in Southwest Asia and North Africa. In addition to Arabic, most people use a second language that is distinct from official Arabic. *Ethnologue* describes   
34 individual Arabic languages apart from the official Arabic. Many of the 1 billion Muslims across the world speak some Arabic, as Islam’s holiest book, the Quran (Koran) was written in the seventh century in the language. Hebrew is also a member of the Afro-Asiatic language family, being the original language of Judaism’s Bible and Christianity’s Old Testament.

**Niger-Congo** More than 95 percent of sub-Saharan Africans use a language from the Niger-Congo family. Yoruba, Igbo, and Swahili are the three most commonly spoken Niger-Congo languages. Nigeria is home to the Yoruba and Igbo languages, while Swahili is the first language of 15 million people and the second language of 25 million people across Africa. Although it is spoken by a great number of people, Swahili is the official language of only one country: Tanzania. While local languages dominate individual villages, Swahili is used by people to communicate with outsiders. Swahili developed through interactions between African groups and Arab traders, so its vocabulary has a pronounced Arabic influence. Swahili is one of the few African languages with a thorough literary tradition.

**Nilo-Saharan** 43 Million people spread across north-central Africa speak languages of the Nilo-Saharan family. This family is instructive in the debate scholars have had regarding the classification of   
Nilo-Saharan languages – despite relatively few people speaking these languages, there are six branches, along with many groups and subgroups.

**America’s Other Language Family: Quechuan** Quechuan is the most widely used language family in the Western Hemisphere aside from Indo-European. Its speakers are mostly concentrated in the Andes Mountains of western South America. According to Ethnologue, 9 million people use a Quechuan language, comprising 44 distinct tongues. Quechuan Cusco is the sole Quechuan language with over 1 million speakers. Spanish is generally a first language for speakers of Quechuan languages. Aymara is another indigenous language of the Andes, with approximately 3 million speakers located in Bolivia.

**Key Issue 2: Where Did English and Related Languages Originate and Diffuse?**

Roughly one-half of the world population use a language of the Indo-European family, with the roots of the family tracing back before recorded history.

**Distribution of Indo-European Branches** Eight branches make up the Indo-European language family, with four being extensively spoken, and four others comprising fewer speakers.

**Germanic Branch** English is part of the West Germanic group of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. Other West Germanic group languages include Dutch, Flemish, Frisian, Afrikaans, and German. The other important Germanic group is North Germanic. The North Germanic group includes four languages spoken in Scandinavia—Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic.

**Romance Branch** The Romance branch is composed of descendants of Latin and stretches from Portugal along the Mediterranean to Slovenia and a pocket in Romania and Moldova. Many Romance languages have multiple dialects, some of which may be variously considered languages in their own right. The four most widely used Romance languages are Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Italian. Romanian is separated from other Romance languages by Slavic-speaking countries.

**Indo-Iranian Branch** The Indo-Iranian branch is the Indo-European language family with the most speakers. The Indo-Iranian branch includes the Indic group which is the main language group in densely populated India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These languages include Persian (also called Farsi) in Iran, Pashto in eastern Afghanistan and Western Pakistan, and Kurdish. The most commonly used language in the Indic group is Hindi. The Iranian group (Iran and southwest Asia) is separate from the Indic group.

**Balto-Slavic Branch** Slavic was once a single language, but differences developed when a group of Slavs migrated from Asia to Eastern Europe. The Slavs were isolated from each other and the languages changed over time. The Balto-Slavic branch is further divided into East Slavic and Baltic language groups and these groups include the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian languages. These languages are used in former Soviet countries, with Russian being the most widely spoken. The Balto-Slavic branch also is divided into the West and South Slavic language groups that cover an area in Eastern Europe from Poland to Macedonia. The West and South Slavic group includes Polish, Czech, Slovak, Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian languages.

**Origin and Diffusion of Indo-European** Thegeographic processes of origin and diffusion have played a role in the extant distribution of languages across the world. While these roots can be traced throughout history, language families predate any recording of their development and spread, allowing scholars to only speculate about their beginnings. The origin and distribution of the Romance language branch and the Indo-European language family illustrate these circumstances.

**Origin and Diffusion of Romance Languages** The Romance languages developed from Latin. The Romans helped diffuse Latin from the Atlantic Ocean on the west to the Black Sea on the east and encompassed all lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Most people in the provinces controlled by Rome learned **Vulgar Latin**, which was a form of Latin used in daily conversation instead of the strict dialect that was used for official documents. After the Roman Empire collapsed, communication among the former provinces declined that distinct languages began to evolve.

**Origin and Diffusion of Indo-European** Since all members of Indo-European language families are related, they must come from a common origin. Linguists generally accept that all the Indo-European languages descended from a single ancestral language, but disagree on where the language originated and the process by which it diffused. Two hypotheses of the language family’s origin are the Nomadic Warrior Theory, and the Sedentary Farmer Theory.

**Nomadic Warrior Theory** According to archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, the first Proto-Indo-European speakers were the Kurgan people of central Asia, specifically the area near the border between present-day Russia and Kazakhstan. The Kurgan people were among the first to domesticate horses and use chariots, leading them to migrate in search of grasslands for their animals. The Kurgans traveled westward through Europe, eastward to Siberia, and southeastward to Iran and South Asia, conquering much of Europe and South Asia between 3500 and 2500 B.C.

**Sedentary Farmer Theory** In a theory posited by archaeologist Colin Renfrew, the Indo-European language family’s roots stretch back even further than the dominance of the Kurgans, with its first speakers living in the eastern part of present-day Turkey circa 6700 B.C. Following this theory,   
Indo-European language diffused into Europe and South Asia in concert with agricultural practices rather than by military conquest.

**Origin and Diffusion of English** When the Celts landed on the shores of the British Isles around 2000 B.C., they brought with them the Celtic languages. Tribes from mainland Europe invaded the Celtic people around A.D. 450, driving them to remote northern and western parts of Britain, including Cornwall and the highlands of Scotland and Wales.

**Germanic Invasion** Three primary tribes invaded the British Isles: the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons. The Jutes invaded from northern Denmark, the Angles from southern Denmark, and the Saxons from northwestern Germany. The languages spoken by these three tribes have each played a role in the evolution of Modern English. In fact, the name England stems from “Angle’s Land,” with Angles being spelled Engles in Old English. Before recorded history, all Germanic peoples spoke a common language, allowing differences that developed between Germanic languages to be used in studying their evolution. Other peoples and languages played a role in the development of English over history, such as the Vikings coming from Norway to northeastern England in the ninth century,

**Norman Invasion** In 1066, England was conquered by the Normans from present-day Normandy in France. This invasion was key in the divergence of today’s English from the current German language. From the time the Normans invaded until the mid-fourteenth century, French was the official language of England. However, while the entitled class (such as the royal family and nobility) spoke French, the majority of people (who had little education) continued to speak English. After the Statute of Pleading was enacted by Parliament in 1362, English once again became the official language of England. Modern English is influenced by both its Germanic and French descent.

**Diffusion of English** The colonial legacy of England over the course of four centuries had an enduring impact on the contemporary distribution of English speakers around the world. England’s conquests brought its language to North America, Ireland, South Asia, the South Pacific, and southern Africa. While English was the official language of countries colonized by England, generally only the rulers installed by the crown and a select group of elite local residents could speak it. The United States’ colonized territories also played a role in English’s diffusion in the twentieth century, most notably in the Philippines, where it is still an official language today.

**Combining English with Other Languages** New languages are being born through the combination of English and other languages. Three examples are most apparent: Franglais, Spanglish, and Denglish. Franglais is mixture of French and English; Spanglish combines Spanish and English; Denglish is an amalgamation of German and English.

**Global Importance of English** In the era of globalization, a common language is essential for the global connections that have developed to not only remain, but also grow. English is the most important language of international communication. However, with the omnipresence of English, populations that don’t use English as a first language must be wary of the potential tradeoffs in placing their native languages in a secondary role.

**Lingua Franca** A language used for international communication are known as Lingua Franca. To aid trade, speakers of two different languages use a lingua franca by mixing elements of the two languages into a simple common one. Meaning “language of the Franks,” the lingua franca was originally applied by Arab traders during the Middle Ages to the language they used to communicate with Europeans, whom they called Franks. The increasing importance of English as a lingua franca can be seen by the percentage of students learning English as a second language in school – more than 90 percent of students in the European Union learn English in either middle or high school. In some places, pidgin languages are used for communication with speakers of other languages. A **pidgin language** borrows words and grammar rules from a lingua franca, and combines them with some elements of other languages. A pidgin language has no native speakers – it is always spoken in addition to one’s native language.

**English on the Internet** The Internet has acted as a solidifying force for ensuring English’s digital dominance. More than one-half of all Internet content is in English, meaning that some knowledge of the language is crucial for engagement with others online. The U.S.-based Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has played a role in the abiding dominance of English on the Internet – this organization manages the assignment of domain names and the suffixes following the dot, such as “com” and “edu.” Since 2009, however, domain names in characters other than Latin, such as Arabic and Chinese, may be used, potentially eroding the ubiquity of English online.

**Chinese: The Next Lingua Franca?** The large number of people who speak Chinese languages affects the probable rise of Chinese in social media. In addition to the sheer amount of people who will come to speak Chinese languages, the way the languages are written broadens their appeal. Chinese languages are written with logograms, which are symbols that represent words or meaningful parts of words. Considering this, Chinese would be an ideal language for Twitter, where messages are limited to 140 characters in English.

**Official Languages** Some countries designate one or more languages as official. The official language is employed by the government to enact legislation and conduct other public business. In some countries, the official language is the only one primarily used in public schools. Europe is home to a large number of official languages, with the E.U. recognizing 24 official and working languages. In 58 countries, English is an official language, more than any other language. More than 2 billion people live in a country that has designated English as an official language, whether they can speak it or not. Although English is primarily spoken in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, it does not hold official status in these countries.

**Key Issue 3: Why Do Individual Languages Vary among Places?**

A **dialect** is a regional variation of a language distinguished by distinctive vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation. Generally, speakers of one dialect can understand speakers of another dialect. A **subdialect** is a subdivision of a dialect. Two subdialects of the same dialect have relatively few differences, primarily in pronunciation and vocabulary. These dialects and subdialects are of keen interest to geographers, as they generally reflect distinctive features of the environments in which groups live.

**English Dialects** Due to its widespread diffusion around the world, English has an especially large number of dialects and subdialects.

**American and British English** The colonists from England who settled along the Atlantic Coast in the seventeenth century established English as the dominant language of North America. Isolation from one another allowed British and U.S. English to develop differences in three key ways – vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation.

**Vocabulary** New objects and experiences allowed for a unique vocabulary to develop in U.S. English. The new landforms witnessed by settlers, such as large forests and mountains, were given names. Native Americans lent many words to U.S. English, such as raccoon, moccasin, and canoe. As technological advances occurred on both sides of the Atlantic, they were given different names – an elevator in the U.S. is referred to as a lift in England.

**Spelling** Differences in spelling between British and U.S. English can largely be attributed to Noah Webster, who with his first comprehensive American dictionary, set out to establish a unique national identity with his work (by dropping the u from many words, and substituting an s for c in many words).

**Pronunciation** Many words with unaccented syllables are pronounced more clearly in the United States as compared to in England. For example, “necessary” is four syllables long in U.S. English, while it contains only three in British English.

**Dialects in the United Kingdom** Dialects are also present within individual countries – in both the United States and England, distinct northern and southern dialects exist. In a language with multiple dialects, one dialect may be designated as the **standard language**, which is a dialect that is well established and widely agreed upon as the most acceptable for government, business, education, and mass communication. **Received Pronunciation** (RP) is the standard language in England, and is commonly used by elected officials, broadcasters, and actors. Three main dialects are spoken today in England – Northern, Midland, and Southern. The boundaries between these dialects are continually shifting, being influenced by migration patterns.

**U.S. Dialects** The distribution of dialects is examined through the use of particular words. Every word that is not used nationally has some geographic extent within the country and therefore has boundaries. Such a word-usage boundary is known as an **isogloss**. An isogloss can be constructed for each word.

**Distribution of U.S. Dialects** The four major dialects of the United States are reflected in individual regions: North, Midland, South, and West. The three eastern dialect regions can also be divided into several subdialects. The current distribution of U.S. dialects can be traced to differences in the origin of the English colonists along the East Coast. The early colonies were home to three dialects: North, South, and Midland. The diffusion of particular English dialects across the United States is a result of the westward expansion of colonists from the three East Coast dialect regions. The American West was settled primarily by people from the Midland dialect region; therefore, people from the North and South dialect region sound remarkably different to people there. While mass media has propelled some regionally distinctive words to national prominence, many words, such as the word(s) people use for soft drink, continue to very regionally,

**African American English** The forced migration of Africans to the United States during the eighteenth century to be slaves in southern colonies engendered the development of a dialect heavily influenced by this event. This dialect was created partially to communicate in a code that could not be understood by their white masters. Black dialect words such as jazz and gumbo have since diffused into the standard English language. After many African Americans migrated to the large cities of the Northeast in the twentieth century, they were segregated in both neighborhoods and schools, thus preserving this dialect, known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or **Ebonics**. Some in the African American community see this as a boon to preserving their cultural heritage, while others see it as an obstacle to success in the United States.

**Appalachian English** Appalachian English, spoken in areas such as rural West Virginia, is a distinct American English dialect. It shares qualities with Ebonics, such as using the double negative, and also adding “a” in front of verbs ending in “ing” (e.g. *a-walking*). The same advantages and disadvantages are seen in Appalachian English as those in Ebonics. Some speakers of Appalachian English and Ebonics are ”bidialectic,” in that they can speak both their regional dialect and the “standard” English dialect.

**Creole Languages** A **creole**, or creolized language, is a language that results from the combination of a colonizer’s language with the language of the indigenous people being oppressed. A creole language initiates when the colonized population adopts the languages of the oppressors, but makes some changes, such as simplifying the grammar and adding words from their native language, and are often considered separate languages from either descendant language. Examples include French Creole in Haiti and Papiamento in Netherlands Antilles.

**Dialect or Language?** Global-local tensions can often be seen in the characterization of dialects and distinct languages. Geographic concepts such as migrations, increased interaction (connections), and other globalization processes can be used to analyze the relationship between standard languages and dialects. In most cases of this scenario, the standard language strengthens while regional dialects are suppressed. In some instances, the drive for cultural identity has resulted in the development of distinct languages that were once characterized as dialects.

**Dialects Become Languages** The Romance branch of the Indo-European language family is illustrative of the difficulty in distinguishing languages from dialects.

**Catalán-Valencian-Balear** Catalán was once considered a dialect of Spanish, but is now recognized as a separate Romance language by linguists. Catalán is the official language of the country of Andorra, and the highly autonomous Catalonia province in Spain. In eastern Spain, it is spoken by approximately   
5 million people. Linguists have also identified distinct dialects of Catalán, such as Balear, spoken in the Balearic Islands of Majorca and Ibiza. Most linguists consider Valencian a dialect of Catalán, while many others consider it a language unto itself.

**Galician** Whether Galician, which is spoken in northwestern Spain and northeastern Portugal, is a dialect of Portuguese or a separate language remains a point of debate among speakers of Galician. Some, such as the Academy of Galician Language, view it as a separate language, while others, such as the Galician Association of the Language, see it as a dialect of Portuguese.

**Moldovan** Moldovan is generally recognized as a dialect of Romanian. However, it is written in Cyrillic letters, a legacy of Moldova being a part of the Soviet Union, while written Romanian uses the Roman alphabet.

**Italy’s Languages** Many regional dialects of Italian, such as Lombard and Napoletano-Calebrese, are now recognized by Ethnologue as sufficiently different to be recognized as separate languages.

**Occitan** Occitan is a language spoken in southern France and neighboring countries, derived from the name of the French region of Aquitaine. The French government has set up bilingual elementary and high schools called *calendretas*, teaching both French and Occitan.

**Standardizing Languages** In efforts to bolster a unified cultural identity, many governments have long promoted the designation of a single dialect as the official or standard language. In France, the Francien French dialect became the standard form of French as Francien was spoken in the Île-de-France region, where Paris, the largest city of the country, is located. Speakers of Spanish and Portuguese have formed councils representing versions of the languages spoken the world over and devised clear rules on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation to maintain linguistic and cultural unity.

**Multilingual Places** Multiple languages coexist in some countries, with varying levels of success. Some countries are relatively segregated concerning the geographic distribution of language, while others see speakers of multiple languages intermingle. This coexistence is peaceful in some countries, while others see cultural divisions among groups due to language differences.

**Switzerland: Institutionalized Diversity** Belgium and Switzerland are countries where language differences are readily apparent, as the boundary between Romance and Germanic languages run through both. Switzerland has seen more success in promoting coexistence among multiple languages compared to Belgium. The government of Switzerland recognizes four official languages (German, French, Italy, and Romansh), and delegates power to the local level, helping to preserve this linguistic harmony.

**Canada: Bilingual Autonomy** Canada recognizes two official languages, French and English. French speakers are most concentrated in the province of Québec, where they were politically disenfranchised for decades under minority rule by English speakers. Tensions between English and French speaking Québécois have eased in recent years, as neighborhoods in the Québec city of Montréal have become more linguistically blended.

**Nigeria: Spatial Compromise** Divisions in Nigeria can be drawn against linguistic, cultural, and religious boundaries. While Ethnologue recognizes 529 distinct languages in the country, only three are used by more than 10 percent of the country: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The northern portion of Nigeria is home to a majority of Muslims, while Christians make up most of the population in the south. In the wake of a civil war from 1967-1970 (stemming from the alleged discrimination of the southern Igbo by the northern Yoruba), the capital city was moved to the central city of Abuja, where no one culture or language is predominant.

**Belgium: Barely Speaking** Belgium is divided roughly in half by language – Southern Belgians speak French, while northern Belgians speak Flemish, a dialect of Dutch. Economic divisions are also evident in Belgium, with the northern region of Flanders being more economically prosperous than the disadvantaged southern region of Wallonia. These cultural, linguistic, and economic differences have led both regions to create autonomous governments, with residents of Flanders even advocating for full independence.

**Key Issue 4: Why Do Local Languages Survive?**

The distribution of a language is often an indicator of the fate of a cultural group – the more diffuse a language, the stronger the cultural identity associated with it is. While the dominance of English as a lingua franca has solidified its presence as the foremost globalizing language in the world, local diversity in language is now being both protected and preserved.

**Endangered Languages** 2,447 of the world’s 7,102 living languages are threatened with extinction, per *Ethnologue*. These languages persevere against globalizing forces through concerted community efforts. The South Pacific, Latin America, and North America are the world’s regions with the largest share of dying languages, due to the dominance of English, Spanish, and Portuguese in these areas.

**Endangered Languages in the South Pacific** Although the colonial legacy of English has set the language’s dominant position, languages that existed prior to the arrival of Europeans still remain. Australia promotes the usage of English as a force for cultural unity, while New Zealand views linguistic diversity as an important element of cultural diversity.

**Australia** Although Aboriginal Australian peoples make up only 1 percent of the country’s population, 211 indigenous languages have survived colonialism. Despite this linguistic diversity, fewer than   
10,000 people speak a non-English native tongue. Restrictions against immigration under a “White Australia” policy played a major role in promoting English as a primary language.

**New Zealand** 14 percent of New Zealand’s population is of Maori descent, with the Maori tracing their history to a migration by Polynesian people to the island nation over 1,000 year ago. Through recognizing Maori as an official language and establishing the Maori Language Commission, the government of New Zealand has enacted policies to preserve and protect the Maori language. Despite this seemingly attitude of inclusion, New Zealand actually has historically had more stringent immigration policies than neighboring Australia.

**Endangered Languages in North America** According to *Ethnologue*, the United States has   
61 languages in trouble and 142 languages classified as dying. These languages were largely spoken by Native Americans, whose older speakers are dying without teaching their language to their children. However, some languages are being “reawakened,” with increased education and cultural pursuits being undertaken (see: the Myaamia language).

**Preserving Languages** Some languages, such as languages belonging to the Celtic branch of the   
Indo-European family, are being preserved and protected. While these Celtic languages were widely spoken in present-day Germany, France, northern Italy, and the British Isles 2,000 years ago, today speakers exist in limited numbers in remote parts of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland and on the Brittany peninsula of France.

**Brythonic Celtic** The Celtic language branch is categorized into Goidelic and Brythonic groups. Speakers of Brythonic are concentrated in Wales, Cornwall, and the Brittany peninsula in France.

**Welsh** Welsh remained the primary language in the country until the nineteenth century, when many English speakers migrated there to work in coal mines and factories. As of 2014, 23 percent of the country speaks Welsh, while another 150,000 speakers live in England. The Welsh Language Society (Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg) has been a driving force in preserving and protecting the language, seeing that it is compulsorily taught in all schools and ensuring governmental and public use.

**Cornish** Cornish is the Celtic language that originated in the county of Cornwall in southwestern England. Although the last native speaker of Cornish died in 1777, a revival has seen 577 people alive today claiming to be fluent. Classes are taught in schools for both children and adults seeking to learn the language.

**Breton** Spoken in the Brittany peninsula of France, the number of people fluent in the language has declined from 1 million in 1950 to approximately 200,000 today, with three quarters of the speakers being over the age of 65. In addition to facing this generational problem, the French government has mandated French as the principal language of instruction in public schools.

**Goidelic Celtic** Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic are the two remaining Goidelic languages.

**Irish** Irish is spoken by 94,000 people on a daily basis, with an additional 1.3 saying that they can speak it and use it occasionally. Usage of Irish is primarily limited to the remote areas of Ireland. After being banned by English colonizers in the fourteenth century, cultural pride in the language has helped preserve and protect it. In 2005, for instance, street signed in portions of western Ireland were banned, and many Irish musicians are now recording in Gaelic.

**Scottish Gaelic** 59,000 people, or 1 percent of the population, in Scotland speak Scottish Gaelic. The enduring cultural heritage of Scots can be seen in Robert Burns’ poem Auld Lang Syne (popular for New Year’s Eve celebrations).

**Isolated and Extinct Languages** The level of interaction among groups of people can be measured by the similarities and differences between their languages. Physical isolation has acted as a preserving and fatal force for some languages.

**Isolated Languages** An **isolated language** is a language that is unrelated to any other and thus not categorized in any language family. Limited interaction with other groups of people breeds a language that may be classified as isolated. Basque is an example of a vigorous isolated language, in that children in Basque society learn Basque as their first language. Basque is a remnant of languages that existed prior to the arrival of speakers of Indo-European languages, a heritage owed in part to their isolated location in the Pyrenees Mountains of Spain and France.

**An Unchanging Language** While Icelandic is not considered an isolated language due to its inclusion in the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family, its geographic isolation has made it so that relatively few changes to the language have occurred over the past 1,000 years.

**Extinct Languages** An **extinct language** is a language that was once used by people in daily activities but is no longer in use. Since 1950, Ethnologue estimates that 367 languages have become extinct, at an annual rate of 6. Languages that face extinction are largely supplanted by languages diffused by globalization.