

## A Concise Exploration of Global Language Families and Their Key Groups

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### Abstract

In the modern era, the global population has exceeded 7 billion people. While most communication occurs in native languages, many individuals also strive to learn a second language to enhance cross-cultural communication. For over 80 years, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), an international organization, has been dedicated to creating a comprehensive record of the world's active languages. According to ethnological databases, there are currently 7,099 languages in active use worldwide. Linguists have invested significant effort in grouping these languages into categories known as language families, which share genealogical connections. This process, known as genetic classification or the genealogy of languages, has led to the identification of 142 different language families. However, only six of these families, each representing languages spoken by at least 5% of the global population, are considered the major language families worldwide. These six are the Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, Austronesian, and Trans-New Guinea language families.

**Keywords:** Race of humans, Family of language Groups, Linguistics approaches, Cultural aspects, Genetic diversity, etc.

### Introduction:

Scholars have historically proposed that humans could be divided into three distinct racial categories. Ancient civilizations like the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans interacted with people of various skin tones and physical characteristics from different regions. Based on these limited encounters, they suggested the existence of three races: Europeans or whites, Africans or blacks, and Asians or yellows. These categories eventually evolved into the terms Caucasians, Negroids, and Mongoloids. Scientists have long attempted to classify human populations into these three races or modified versions of them.

However, the era of European exploration, beginning in the late fifteenth century AD, led to increased contact with a wide range of civilizations around the globe. By the nineteenth century AD, it became clear that most of the world's population did not fit neatly into the three-race model.

It's important to note that the classification of races has been a subject of continuous debate and re-evaluation within anthropology. In recent times, alternative perspectives on human

racial classification have emerged, challenging the simplistic racial categorizations that were once widely accepted in earlier scholarly work.<sup>1</sup>

The term “language family” refers to a group of languages that originate from a shared ancestral language, regardless of the geographic or cultural differences among the populations that speak to them. Linguists identify linguistic relationships by examining similarities in fundamental words and structural features, rather than relying solely on superficial similarities or geographic proximity. Languages are grouped based on their deeper linguistic structures and grammar, rather than just the specific vocabulary they use. It is common for languages to adopt loanwords from other languages; for instance, Turkish has incorporated many words from Arabic, Persian, French, and German. Languages that have evolved from a common ancestral language within a language family are called "cognate languages," and speakers of these languages form a modern linguistic community. The study of languages is important for researchers and historians, as it helps uncover the relationships among language families and trace their development over time.<sup>2</sup>

### **Description:**

Language is an essential tool for communication in human society, encompassing the production of speech and sounds used by individuals in various social settings. The origins of language can be traced back to early childhood, where infants begin with simple vocalizations that carry social meaning. As they grow, children learn the meanings of words within their family environment and gradually progress to imitating speech, which helps develop their linguistic abilities.

Scholars investigating the origins of language often explore the early stages of human history. Some believe that language is a divine gift or a revelation from God, a view supported by philosophers like Plato and echoed by Arab scholars such as Ibn Fāris and Al-Ash‘arī. On the other hand, another perspective suggests that language is a product of human history, evolving through cultural development and social convention. This view, which aligns with positivism, is endorsed by thinkers like Diodorus and Cicero, as well as Arab scholars like Abū ‘Alī al-Fārisī and Ibn Jinnī.

However, this historical perspective has faced criticism, particularly for its reliance on analogies with animal behaviour and primitive societies. Proponents argue that early human communication was like animal signalling, characterized by gestures, sounds, and movements without the complexity of structured language. Observations of contemporary societies, especially among indigenous groups in Australia and central South America,

suggest that early human communication heavily relied on non-verbal cues and basic vocalizations.

Despite these differing views, human language has undergone a complex evolution over time, shaped by social, cultural, and cognitive influences. The development of language allowed humans to express increasingly complex ideas and emotions, leading to the creation of diverse linguistic systems around the world. As humans adapted to new environments and societal demands, language continued to evolve, showcasing the remarkable adaptability and creativity inherent in human communication.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Unity of Human Origin and its Diversity:**

All modern humans belong to the biological species *Homo sapiens*, but this was not always the case in human history. In earlier times, different types of humans and hominids coexisted, each adapting to the challenges of their environment. Today, the Earth is primarily populated by *Homo sapiens*, which is further divided into various subgroups, including main and subspecies groups. The field of physical anthropology studies these human groups, seeking to identify the common characteristics that define modern humans as well as the distinct traits that set each ancestral group apart. Additionally, it aims to trace the evolution of humanity from its origins to the present day.

Anthropology, as a discipline, emphasizes the biological study of humans, with a central focus on the concept of race. Classifying ancient and contemporary humans into distinct racial categories has been a key objective. Long before anthropology became a formal scientific field, philosophers debated the physical differences among human groups. These discussions were driven by observable variations in characteristics like skin colour, hair texture, eye colour, height, and nose shape among different populations.

The idea of a shared human origin has roots extending over 2,000 years and is often connected to religious beliefs about the beginnings of mankind. Monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have traditionally supported the idea of a single origin for humanity, often represented by figures like Adam and Eve. Consequently, many people, influenced by religious teachings, believed in a common ancestry for all humans.

However, the rise of secularism in Europe and the subsequent era of European colonial expansion across the Americas, Australia, and Africa led some writers to propose the idea of multiple human origins. This theory suggested that European populations had

different origins from African or Asian populations, often motivated by ideologies of racial superiority and the desire to justify the subjugation or exploitation of indigenous peoples.

In the early twentieth century, these ideas reappeared in a semi-scientific form, characterized by scepticism regarding the unity of human origins. Some scholars speculated that the Mongoloid race was connected to the Peking Man (*Sinanthropus pekinensis*), while the Negroid race was linked to the Java Man. However, these claims were criticized by prominent scholars, such as Professor Franz Weidenreich, who pointed out the flaws in these arguments and their lack of empirical support.

In 1962, Professor Carlton Stephens Coon introduced a new theory, revising his earlier views to propose the idea of multiple origins for modern humans. Coon's theory suggested that there were five distinct ancestral origins, each leading to different human groups that inhabit the world today.

The first of these groups referred to as Australians or Southerners (South Austral), is believed to have originated from the island of Java and nearby Asian regions. Descendants of the Java Man, these groups evolved to become the indigenous peoples of Australia, Papua New Guinea, Melanesia, and various Southeast Asian populations, including the Ayeta of Luzon Island and the Samangs of the Malay Peninsula.

According to Coon's <sup>4</sup> theory, the Mongols, identified as the second group, originated in China and are considered descendants of the Peking Man. Over time, this group expanded across East and North Asia, with exceptions such as the Ainu of northern Japan and the Inuit and Amerindians in the Americas. The influence of the Mongols also extended into Polynesia.

Coon proposed that Caucasians originated in western Asia and evolved into modern Europeans around 250,000 years ago. From there, they migrated across various regions, including the Americas, the Middle East, and India. He also speculated that the Ainu might have roots in this group.

The Capoids, another distinct group, migrated into North Africa and eventually developed into populations such as the San (Bushmen) and Khoikhoi (Hottentots) in southwest Africa.

Finally, the Congoids are believed to have originated in Central Africa, particularly in the Congo Basin, later diversifying into various populations across Africa, including Negroid and Pygmy groups.

Coon's theory presents a framework for understanding the diversity and origins of human populations, emphasizing the complex evolutionary processes that have shaped modern humans.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Evolution of Human Races:**

One of the primary challenges in anthropology is understanding the development of modern *Homo sapiens* from their ancient origins. Due to the limited fossil record, there is considerable debate on this topic. Until the late 1950s, the prevailing belief was that *Homo sapiens* did not evolve from Neanderthals but rather that Neanderthals were a separate subspecies that evolved parallel to the lineage of *Homo sapiens*. However, a conference held in 1962 in Burg-Wartenstein, Austria, focused on human evolution, concluded that Neanderthals were a subspecies of *Homo sapiens* and may have either gone extinct or interbred with early *Homo sapiens* populations in various regions.

Many contemporary views suggest that *Homo sapiens* represent a species with significant morphological and behavioural diversity that evolved from archaic human ancestors. Two primary theories explain this evolutionary process. The first, known as the cladogenetic origin, posits that *Homo sapiens* evolved from geographically isolated human groups, which eventually spread and outcompeted other human populations due to advantageous traits such as larger brain size and advanced tool-making abilities. Birdsell is among the proponents of this theory.

The second theory, supported by Dobzhansky and others, argues that all human groups underwent evolutionary changes to varying degrees, leading to the emergence of *Homo sapiens* through gene flow, continuous migration, and adaptive changes in response to environmental shifts. Dobzhansky defined a "race" as a group of genetically related individuals that are partially isolated, with gene exchange and migration constantly altering these groups. He also emphasized that cultural shifts, such as transitions from hunting to agriculture or from rural to urban living, play a role in natural selection.

Another perspective, known as punctuated evolution, suggests that ancient human populations lived in small, isolated groups during the Stone Age, which allowed phylogenetic changes to occur independently in different populations. Gene exchange was slow, leading to the differentiation of human populations. However, practices like exogamy, which avoids intermarriage within the same group, and various tribal movements, including invasions and migrations, eventually accelerated gene exchange and promoted common development among different lineages.

While these theories offer valuable insights, some scepticism remains regarding the influence of cultural factors, such as exogamy, on genetic exchange. Although exogamy initially facilitated some gene exchange, social and religious barriers often led to isolation, particularly in early tribal societies. This isolation, in turn, accelerated genetic differentiation while still contributing to common development among various lineages.

In conclusion, the comprehensive theory of evolution, as described by Dobzhansky as a large river fed by many tributaries, suggests that human evolution is shaped by a multitude of factors that ultimately converge into a unified process. Nesturkh's assertion that human races are a product of historical development underscores the complex interplay between environmental, social, and genetic influences in shaping human evolution and racial diversity.<sup>6</sup>

When human populations expanded into diverse environments, the impact of these environments on human evolution differed markedly from the effects seen in animal species. This difference is rooted in the distinct ways humans and animals interact with their surroundings. Unlike animals, which primarily adapt to and maintain their environment, humans actively modify and reshape their environment to suit their needs through collective action.

Soviet scientists argued that early humans had adaptive traits that allowed them to survive in various environments. However, as human societies evolved and the importance of collective effort in altering the environment grew, these individual adaptive traits became less critical and eventually faded. As a result, the principles of natural selection, which played a significant role in early human evolution, diminished in importance as human societies gained greater control over their surroundings.

Initially, the isolation of human races in different geographical areas was significant, but as populations expanded and interactions between groups increased, racial intermingling became more common. Anthropologists suggest that periods of isolation, followed by contact and interbreeding, occurred multiple times throughout human history. With each wave of population growth and mixing, new traits emerged and became established, eventually leading to the development of modern humans and the diversity seen in contemporary populations.

While geographical barriers such as mountains, deserts, and dense forests posed obstacles to human migration, they did not completely prevent the movement of people. Therefore, isolation, migration, population growth, and racial interbreeding have been

identified as key factors in the formation of present-day human populations. These factors, both individually and in combination, have been instrumental in shaping the genetic and cultural diversity observed in human societies throughout history. <sup>7</sup>

### **Modern Man's Evolution:**

While certain traits in animal breeds may have become fixed over time, the study of phylogenies is a relatively recent field, which limits our understanding of the ongoing evolutionary changes within contemporary human populations. Over the last four centuries, particularly since the age of major geographical explorations, significant migrations have taken place, with many individuals moving to new environments. However, our insights into this evolutionary process are still somewhat limited. Nonetheless, the continuous movement of people across international borders and from rural areas to urban centres has undeniably facilitated the rapid exchange of genes worldwide, except in isolated regions.

Additionally, major advancements in medical science have led to the reduction or elimination of genes linked to specific diseases. This progress has not only decreased the transmission of certain disease-associated genes but has also resulted in the emergence of new disease genes that are better adapted to modern living conditions. Some anthropologists have even suggested eradicating harmful genes, advocating for measures such as the compulsory sterilization of carriers as a potential solution.

Genes are influenced not just by medical practices but also by a variety of factors, including climate, rural versus urban living conditions, social inequalities, and dietary habits. These environmental factors shape how genes are expressed and transmitted, contributing to the ongoing evolution of the human species.

The dismantling of isolation barriers, combined with population growth and increased intermingling over the past four centuries, has accelerated human evolution. As humans adapt more readily to their environments, their capacity for biological evolution broadens, facilitating rapid development and adjustment to changing circumstances.

Professor Washburn <sup>8</sup> argues that intelligence, longevity, and happiness are primarily shaped by the social systems within societies. He contends that the social structure of a community plays a significant role in determining the genetic traits found in its population. However, he observes that few societies have begun to recognize the genetic potential of their members, indicating a reliance on outdated practices despite advancements in scientific understanding.

Washburn considers the idea of dynasties to be anachronistic, noting that they merely reflect conditions that no longer hold. He also critiques racism as an obsolete concept that lacks support from contemporary science.

Mughal lineages behind certain physical features, such as those associated with the Mughal lineage, may remain unclear, Washburn emphasizes the real benefits that education and economic development can provide.

Furthermore, he highlights the severe repercussions of racial intolerance, arguing that it breeds death, despair, and animosity. In his call for social unity and progress, Washburn stresses the need to embrace diversity and reject discriminatory beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

### **Language Families:**

Linguistic research reveals that our planet is home to more than 7,000 distinct languages, each possessing its own unique history, structure, and sound patterns. This rich tapestry of languages reflects the diverse cultures and traditions of the people who speak to them. Estimates suggest that nearly half a million individuals across the globe are multilingual, greatly enhancing the total number of people who are proficient in various languages.

Among these languages, English stands out as the third most widely spoken language in the world. However, it is important to note that statistics often focus solely on the number of speakers, which may not fully capture the nuances of English's global influence or the multilingual capabilities of its speakers. This highlights the dynamic nature of language use and the complex interplay between different linguistic communities worldwide.<sup>10</sup>

Languages around the world are organized into various language families, which are groups of related languages that have evolved from a common ancestral language known as a protolanguage. The prefix “proto” is derived from the Greek term meaning "earliest" or “first.” While the specific protolanguage for many language families cannot be identified directly, linguists use the comparative method to analyze similarities and establish relationships among different languages, helping to trace their common origins.

In certain cases, a protolanguage can be linked to a known historical language. For example, the various provincial dialects of Arabic are understood to have developed into the modern Arabic languages we recognize today. This suggests that Proto-Arabic, the ancestral form of Arabic, closely resembles the Arabic language as it is spoken currently.

Within these language families, smaller units are identified as branches, which further categorize languages based on their specific linguistic features. Taking the Indo-European



language family as a case in point, it encompasses several branches, including the Germanic, Slavic, and Romance branches. Each of these branches contains languages that share more specific linguistic characteristics while also maintaining a connection to the broader Indo-European family. This system of classification helps linguists understand the historical development and relationships between languages, shedding light on how they have transformed and diversified over time.<sup>11</sup>

### **Largest Language Families:**

The current linguistic landscape of the world showcases an impressive array of languages that reflect the rich cultural diversity of humanity. With more than 7 billion people living on the planet, a pertinent question arises: how many distinct languages do these individuals use for communication, and how many of these languages are within our capacity to learn? To explore this question, we can turn to the work of SIL International (Summer Institute of Linguistics), an organization that has dedicated over eighty years to the study and classification of languages around the globe.

SIL International's extensive research efforts have resulted in the development of Ethnologue, a comprehensive database that catalogues the world's living languages. This invaluable resource provides detailed information on the languages spoken in various regions, their speakers, and their linguistic characteristics. According to Ethnologue, there are currently 7,099 actively spoken languages worldwide. This number illustrates not only the vastness of human linguistic expression but also highlights the importance of language in facilitating communication, cultural exchange, and understanding among diverse populations.

As we consider the implications of this linguistic diversity, it becomes clear that while many individuals may focus on learning a handful of widely spoken languages, the existence of thousands of languages presents both challenges and opportunities for language learners and researchers alike. The richness of this linguistic tapestry encourages a deeper appreciation for the varied ways in which people express their thoughts, emotions, and identities across different cultures.<sup>12</sup>

Linguistic research has identified six primary language families that play a crucial role in the global linguistic landscape, collectively accounting for over 25 percent of the world's languages. These major language families are significant not only for their numbers but also for their cultural, historical, and geographical implications. Below is an overview of these six prominent language families:

1. **Indo-European:** This is one of the largest language families in the world, encompassing a wide range of languages spoken across Europe and parts of Asia. It includes major branches such as the Germanic, Romance, Slavic, and Indo-Iranian languages. Languages like English, Spanish, Russian, and Hindi fall under this family, showcasing its vast reach and influence.
2. **Sino-Tibetan:** Predominantly spoken in East Asia, this family includes languages such as Mandarin, Cantonese, and Tibetan. The Sino-Tibetan family is noted for its tonal languages and complex writing systems, particularly the logographic characters used in Chinese.
3. **Niger-Congo:** This is the largest language family in Africa and includes a diverse array of languages spoken across sub-Saharan Africa. Notable languages in this family include Swahili, Yoruba, and Zulu. The Niger-Congo family is characterized by its rich noun-class systems and widespread use of prefixes and suffixes.
4. **Afro-Asiatic:** This family includes languages spoken in North Africa and the Horn of Africa, as well as parts of the Middle East. Major languages within this family are Arabic, Amharic, and Hausa. The Afro-Asiatic languages are known for their unique morphological features and historical significance.
5. **Austronesian:** Spanning a vast area from Madagascar to the Pacific Islands, the Austronesian language family includes languages such as Malay, Tagalog, and Hawaiian. This family is remarkable for its maritime culture and extensive use of languages in island communities.
6. **Trans-New Guinea:** Primarily found in Papua New Guinea and parts of Indonesia, this family comprises numerous languages, many of which are spoken by small populations in remote areas. Trans-New Guinea languages are characterized by their complex phonetic systems and diverse grammatical structures.

Understanding these language families provides valuable insights into human migration, cultural exchange, and the intricate relationships between languages throughout history. Each family reflects unique linguistic characteristics and cultural heritage, contributing to the rich tapestry of human communication worldwide.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Spread of Languages:**

According to the United Nations, several languages have emerged as the most widely spoken around the world, reflecting the diverse cultural and demographic landscape of global

communication. Leading the list is Mandarin Chinese, which boasts the highest number of native speakers, primarily due to China's large population. Following closely is Spanish, widely spoken across Spain, Latin America, and increasingly in the United States, making it the second most spoken language globally. English, often considered the lingua franca of international business and diplomacy, ranks third, with a substantial number of native speakers and an even larger number of non-native speakers who have adopted it as a second language.

In addition to these three dominant languages, several others play significant roles in global communication. Arabic is notable for its prevalence in the Middle East and North Africa, where it serves as a unifying language for diverse cultures and dialects. Hindi and Bengali are also among the most spoken languages, thanks to the vast populations of India and Bangladesh, respectively. Portuguese, largely due to Brazil's population and its historical presence in Africa and Asia, is another prominent language. Furthermore, languages such as Japanese, German, Russian, and French round out the list of widely spoken languages, each with considerable numbers of speakers and cultural influence.

These languages are not only significant for their native speaker populations but also for the large number of individuals who learn them as second languages. For instance, many people around the world, particularly in economically powerful nations such as the United States, show a keen interest in learning Mandarin and Hindi. This interest is largely driven by the recognition of China and India as major players in the global economy, as well as the cultural and commercial opportunities that come with proficiency in these languages.

The influence of these languages extends beyond simple communication; they are integral to understanding the economic, cultural, and political dynamics of their respective regions. As globalization continues to shape our world, the ability to communicate in these widely spoken languages will likely remain an asset for individuals seeking to engage with diverse cultures and markets on an international scale.<sup>14</sup>

The dynamic evolution and spread of languages are profoundly influenced by significant historical events, which have shaped the linguistic landscape we see today. Key factors such as invasions, wars, migrations, and the spread of religious beliefs have all contributed to the dissemination of various languages across regions.

One of the most notable examples is the Arabic language, which expanded significantly alongside the rise of Islam. As Muslim armies moved into new territories during the early Islamic conquests, they not only spread their religion but also their language. Arabic

became the lingua franca in many regions, particularly in North Africa and parts of the Middle East, facilitating communication and trade among diverse populations.

Similarly, the Spanish language saw a remarkable expansion throughout the Americas during the Age of Exploration. Spanish explorers and conquistadors brought their language with them as they claimed vast territories in the New World. This resulted in Spanish becoming the dominant language in numerous countries across Central and South America, and it continues to be spoken by millions today.

The British Empire also played a pivotal role in the global spread of the English language. As Britain established colonies around the world, English became the language of administration, education, and commerce in many regions. This colonial legacy has contributed to English being recognized as a global lingua franca, facilitating international business, diplomacy, and cultural exchange.

Additionally, trade and agriculture have historically influenced language adoption. In many regions, individuals have adopted official languages or local dialects to engage in commerce effectively. For instance, as trade routes developed, languages that were used in trade became more widely spoken. This economic necessity often led to bilingualism or multilingualism, as speakers learned the languages essential for their livelihoods.

Cultural shifts have also significantly impacted language dynamics. The dominance of Hollywood in the entertainment industry has popularized English around the world, with films, television shows, and music contributing to its global appeal. The proliferation of new technologies, particularly the internet and social media, has further amplified this effect, as English-language content often dominates digital platforms, influencing communication patterns and language usage globally.

Furthermore, educational institutions play a critical role in the proliferation of languages. Schools and universities often provide instruction in official and international languages, encouraging students to learn languages that are valuable in the global job market. This educational focus not only promotes language proficiency but also fosters cultural exchange and understanding among diverse populations.

In summary, the spread of languages is a complex interplay of historical events, economic factors, cultural influences, and educational initiatives. These elements collectively shape the way languages evolve and interact, resulting in a rich tapestry of linguistic diversity across the globe.<sup>15</sup>

**Conclusion:**

The exploration of language families and the distribution of languages across the globe reveals a multifaceted tapestry of linguistic diversity shaped by historical, cultural, and social influences. The six prominent language families serve as foundational categories for understanding the relationships among various languages, while the three most widely spoken languages—Chinese (Mandarin), Hindi (Urdu), and English—highlight the significant impact of demographic factors and globalization on language usage.

Mandarin's status as the leading language in terms of speakers underscores the importance of China's vast population, while English's rise as a global lingua franca reflects its growing relevance in international communication, particularly in rapidly developing nations like India and China. Moreover, the identification of ten major language groups, including the extensive Niger-Congo family, further illustrates the rich linguistic heritage present in different regions.

The Indo-European language family, encompassing a diverse array of languages such as Spanish, French, Russian, Hindi, and Urdu, showcases the broad reach and historical significance of its members, with approximately 3 billion native speakers worldwide. Additionally, Arabic's prominence in the Middle East highlights the role of cultural and religious factors in shaping language distribution.

Ultimately, understanding the complexities of language families and their global contexts enriches our appreciation of human communication and underscores the vital role that language plays in connecting diverse communities. This linguistic diversity is a testament to humanity's shared history and cultural evolution, emphasizing the ongoing significance of language in fostering understanding and collaboration across different societies.

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