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Modern Language

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Introduction

If we were to look up the term *lazy* in a dictionary, we might expect to find some unflattering connotations. Let's skip over such definitions as "adverse or resistant to work," "slothful," and "sluggish," and adopt a more positive, charitable perspective. If instead we consider lazy "economical" or "avoiding waste," we get a much better picture of the idea behind *The Very Lazy Intellectual* series.

This series of books is a set of short, economical references full of the fundamental knowledge you need to know to sound as if you *really* know something about a particular academic subject. *The Very Lazy Intellectual: Modern Languages* lays out the indispensable facts, sample words and phrases, and fascinating elements of the world's most commonly spoken languages to build your knowledge foundation.

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If you'd like to learn more about modern languages and more, check out *The Lazy Intellectual* available in print (978-1-4405-0456-3) and eBook (978-1-4405-0888-2) formats.

American Sign Language

American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete and complex language that uses hand signs and other movements, including body postures and facial expressions, for communication. It is the first language of many deaf people in North America.

Other than its means of expression, sign language resembles spoken languages in every way. There is no universal sign language; even ASL and British Sign Language are so different that they are to be mutually unintelligible. This situation also demonstrates that sign languages are not dependent on oral languages but have developed on their own.

The exact origin of ASL is not clear. French Sign Language was brought to this country in 1815 and used in the first school for the deaf in the United States, the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. As a result, ASL and French Sign Language share a large vocabulary but despite this are mutually unintelligible.

Fast Fact

In oral languages, only one sound can be made at a time, so complex ideas require longer and more complex phrases. In sign language, several meanings can be expressed simultaneously through variations in hand and body movement and facial expression.

American Sign Language uses hand shape, movement, and position; body movements; gestures; facial expressions; and other visual cues to form words. The complexity of ASL requires years of study and practice for mastery. Like all languages, ASL contains rules for grammar, punctuation, and syntax. And like all languages, ASL evolves with its users and varies regionally and in its use of jargon and expression.

A deaf child who is born to deaf parents who already use ASL will acquire ASL as naturally as a hearing child picks up spoken language from hearing parents. However, a deaf child with hearing parents who have no prior experience with ASL will acquire language differently. This is important because 90 percent of children born deaf are born to parents who are not.

Person of Importance: Thomas Gallaudet

Thomas Gallaudet (1787–1851) was born in Philadelphia and originally intended to become a minister. He graduated Yale with a degree in education and was asked to teach the deaf daughter of the family doctor. His interest in the special needs of deaf students led him to establish what would become the American School for the Deaf, the first of its kind in the United States.

Because sign languages have a high level of complexity, requiring fingers, hands, and the face of the body to often move simultaneously, sign languages are not often written. In most developed countries, deaf signers learn to read and write their country's oral language. However, there have been several attempts to develop a written sign language. In 1965, William Stokoe published *A Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* that uses a notation system of letters, numbers, and symbols. The Hamburg Notational System, HamNoSys, and SignWriting were developed later and are phonetic systems that can be used for any language.

Arabic

Arabic is a member of the West Semitic group of the Semitic subfamily of the Afroasiatic family of languages. Arabic is the language of the Qur'an (Koran), the holy book of Islam, and is used widely throughout the Muslim world. It is the mother tongue of more than 180 million people. Classical Arabic, the form used in the Qur'an, has been standardized for use as a written language throughout the Arab world. There are many spoken dialects broken into three principal groups, some of which are mutually incomprehensible.

Fast Fact

Prior to the seventh century, Arabic was limited primarily to the Arabian Peninsula. It spread to the Fertile Crescent and North Africa. Today Arabic is spoken in the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and the African nations of Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, and Chad.

Like other Semitic languages, such as Hebrew, Arabic uses a root system that consists of three consonants separated and surrounded by vowels. The consonant root conveys an idea — the consonants *k-t-b* convey the idea of writing, for example — and the addition of vowels produces related words such as *book*, *library*, and *office*. Nouns, verbs, pronouns, and adjectives have gender. Arabic has very few irregular verbs and does not use the present tense of the verb “to be.” Normally the verb occurs at the beginning of a sentence.

The Arabic alphabet contains twenty-eight consonants and three vowels. Most of the characters have different forms depending on where they appear in a word. The vowels are indicated by symbols above or below the consonants, but these are optional and infrequently used.

Fast Fact

The Arabic numeral system was first conceived in India, was passed to the Islamic world, and then to Europe in the tenth century. They are referred to as “Arabic numerals” because Arabs in North Africa transmitted them to Europe.

The sounds used in Arabic are very different from those of English and European languages; some are unique. There are a number of distinctive guttural sounds and others requiring changes in the shape of the pharynx and tongue that are unnatural for non-native Arabic speakers.

While Arabic has borrowed very few words from English, it has lent many. English words of Arabic origin include: *alcohol*, *algebra*, *coffee*, *guitar*, *jar*, *mattress*, *orange*, and *sugar*.

Bengali

Bengali is a member of the Indo-Aryan group of the Indo-Iranian subfamily of the Indo-European family of languages. It is native to an eastern South Asian region known as Bengal, which includes Bangladesh, the Indian state of West Bengal, and parts of the Indian states of Tripura and Assam. More than 210 million people speak Bengali as a first or second language with about 100 million in Bangladesh, about 85 million in India, and large immigrant communities in the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Middle East. It is the official language of Bangladesh.

Like Hindi, Bengali descended from Sanskrit. Since 1800, the language has been simplified somewhat by the shortening of verbs and pronouns and other changes. Today there are two literary styles: “Sadhubhasa” is the older form, and “Chaltibhasa” is the simplified, current form.

Sadhubhasa has been the form used in Bengali literature, business, and formal communication since the nineteenth century. Chaltibhasa is the language used in everyday communication.

Fast Fact

During the days of the Raj, many English words were added to the Bengali language.

Bengali is written in its own script although it strongly resembles Hindi, Sanskrit, and other Indian languages. The Bengali script contains twelve vowels and fifty-two consonants. The language is written left to right and the most common word order is subject-object-verb. In spoken Bengali, stress is usually placed on the first syllable of a word, and sentences have a distinctive intonation pattern. Except for the last word in a declarative sentence, virtually every word is pronounced with a rising pitch, lending a song-like quality to speech.

Chinese

The Chinese language, including its numerous dialects, is spoken natively by more people than any other language in the world. It is also distinguished by being one of just a few modern languages with a history that can be documented, unbroken, to the second century B.C. It belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family, which includes more than 300 languages and major dialects. Spoken Chinese includes modern dialects that are as different from each other as they are from the Romance languages.

Mandarin Chinese is the most widespread form of Chinese; more than 800 million people in central and northern China and Taiwan speak it as a native language. Another 100 million people speak it as a second language. Mandarin was originally the language of the imperial court but has since been adopted and simplified and is now the official language of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. It is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations. The other major forms of Chinese include Wu, Fukienese (Northern Min), Cantonese (Yue), Hakka (Kejia), and Amoy-Swato (Southern Min), which together are spoken by 230 million people.

The various forms of Chinese are very similar in their grammar; they differ in vocabulary and particularly in pronunciation. While all Chinese forms share a common body of literature, there is no standard of pronunciation, and speakers use the pronunciation rules of their own form. In Chinese, tonal differences distinguish words that would otherwise be pronounced alike; for example, there are four tones in Mandarin for a high tone, a rising tone, a combination falling and rising tone, and a falling tone. Chinese lacks inflection to indicate person, number, gender, case, tense, or voice, and it is strongly monosyllabic.

Fast Fact

It's necessary to understand about 3,000 characters to read most Chinese newspapers and magazines; knowledge of at least 6,000 characters is needed to read Chinese literature or technical writing.

The Chinese system of writing was developed more than 4,000 years ago and consists of individual characters or ideograms, each representing a word or idea rather than a sound. So while spoken languages vary so as to be mutually incomprehensible, the written form is commonly understood. This has not prevented mass illiteracy, however, as it's necessary to know several thousand characters in order to read a newspaper. The government of the People's Republic of China introduced simplified versions of common characters in 1956 and is making a greater effort to standardize the pronunciation of words in Mandarin.

Endangered Languages

Estimates vary for the number of languages involved, but linguists believe that as many as half of the world's nearly 7,000 languages are endangered, that is, parents are not using the language daily nor are they teaching the language to their children. Most of these languages will disappear without being adequately recorded. Although the extinction of languages is not a new phenomenon — half of the world's languages have already become extinct over the last 500 years — the rate of extinction is accelerating. In the next 100 years, as many as ninety percent of current languages may be lost.

Currently, 330 languages are spoken by one million or more people. Yet half the languages in the world are spoken by 6,000 or fewer people, and 450 languages have just a few elderly speakers. There are many factors that contribute to the endangerment of a language: the number of speakers, the ages, whether children are using the language, regular use of other languages, feelings of identity and other attitudes toward the language, displacement of the speaker population, government and religious policies, the languages used in education, economic intrusion, and exploitation. The language may also lack a body of literature or even an alphabet to serve as focus for preservation.

To counter the threat, linguists organized the Endangered Languages Information and Infrastructure workshop with a grant from the National Science Foundation. The workshop, held in November of 2009 at the University of Utah, was the start of an effort to produce an authoritative comprehensive online catalogue, database, and updatable website of information on endangered languages.

The reasons for preserving languages are many. Each language expresses the nature of the society in which it developed. Languages contain, explain, and transfer the intellectual wisdom of populations of people. Languages demonstrate observations of and adaptations to the world around their speakers. Languages are reflections of cultures and document humanity and what it is to be human.

English

English is a member of the West Germanic group of the Germanic subfamily of the Indo-European family of languages. It is the official language of about 45 sovereign states and is spoken by approximately 470 million people worldwide, making it the third most commonly spoken language. English is the most widely dispersed of languages — it is spoken on six continents — and is the most popular foreign language in most other countries in the world.

Fast Fact

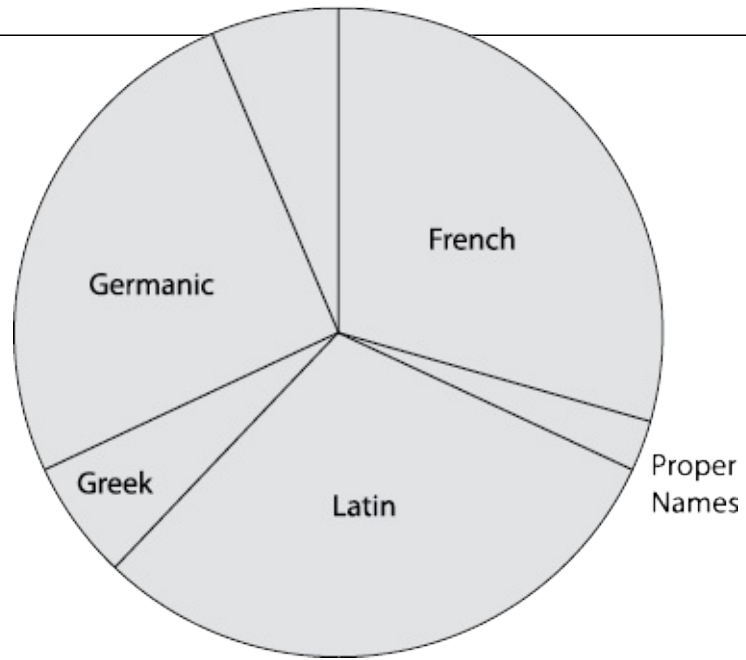
English is not the official language of the United States or the United Kingdom.

English is derived from the language spoken by fifth-century Germanic invaders of Britain. There is no record of any forms of the language before those invasions. French superseded English as an official language after the Norman Conquest of Britain in the eleventh century, but by the fourteenth century English had again become dominant. English can be divided into Old English (prior to the Norman Conquest), Middle English (which extended to about 1500), and Modern English. It changed greatly over the years, affecting sounds, meaning, and grammar. Because pronunciation of English words has changed radically while spelling has changed very little since the fifteenth century, English spelling is not a reliable indication of pronunciation.

Many common words in English are holdovers from Old English; Latin and Scandinavian settlers provided others. Because French became the language of official life and the court following the Norman Conquest, that language provided a significant vocabulary, particularly legal terms and words for social rank and institutions. English has been influenced by classical languages since the time of the Renaissance, with Greek and Latin furnishing many scientific terms. When English speakers reached North America in the seventeenth century, the language took a new track and developed separately from British English. English has continued to expand and most of the world's languages are represented in its vocabulary to some degree.

The following graph shows the relative influences of other languages and sources on the vocabulary of the English language:

Unknown



Esperanto

In 1887, Dr. Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, a Polish oculist and linguist, introduced Esperanto, an artificial language intended to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages. Zamenhof grew up Jewish in a Russian-speaking family who lived on the Polish-Russian border. There were four distinct populations at the time: Russians, Poles, Germans, and Jews, each of whom spoke their own language and treated the others as enemies. Hoping to promote tolerance, he devoted ten years to developing an international language, and published a textbook explaining the language under the pseudonym *Doktoro Esperanto* (Doctor Hopeful).

Esperanto uses words derived from roots commonly found in European languages, primarily the Romance languages, making it relatively easy to learn for Europeans. The roots can be expanded using a regular process of prefixes and suffixes, allowing speakers to create new words as needed. Words are spelled as pronounced and grammar is simple and regular. Parts of speech have their own suffixes: all nouns end with an *O*, all adjectives end with *A*, and all verbs use a suffix to indicate one of six tenses and moods. Nouns have no gender. Esperanto uses a 28-letter alphabet, dropping the letters *Q*, *W*, and *Y* from the Latin alphabet and adding six letters with diacritics.

Esperanto is arguably the most successful of the artificial international languages. The number of Esperanto speakers is estimated at more than 100,000. The Universal Esperanto Association (UEA) was founded in 1908 and is the largest international organization for Esperanto speakers, with members in 118 countries. The UEA works “not only to promote Esperanto, but to stimulate discussion of the world language problem and to call attention to the necessity of equality among languages.”

Most Esperanto speakers currently learn the language through self-directed study, although it has been taught in schools and universities worldwide. And, despite its simplicity and structural regularity, it has not gained a wide enough acceptance to meet the goal of an international language.

Fast Fact

Adolf Hitler saw Esperanto as a threat. In his work *Mein Kampf*, Hitler claims that Esperanto is a language that would be used by the “international Jewish conspiracy” when they had achieved world domination.

French

French is a Romance language, although that's not why it's often called the language of love. In linguistic terms, "Romance" comes from the word Roman and simply means "from Latin." The complete language family classification of French is Indo-European > Italic > Romance. Indo-European is the largest language family and contains most European, American, and Asian languages including such varied languages as Latin, Greek, Gaelic, Polish, and Hindi. Italic basically refers to Latin. Romance languages are originally from Western Europe, although due to colonization some of them are found all over the world. French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese are all Romance languages. French written materials date from the Strasbourg Oaths of 842.

KEY PHRASES

English: French

Hello: *Bonjour*

Goodbye: *Au revoir*

My name is: *Je m'appelle*

I would like: *Je voudrais*

Please: *S'il vous plaît*

How much?: *Combien?*

Thank you: *Merci*

Excuse me: *Excusez-moi*

Where?: *Où?*

Left: *À gauche*

Right: *À droit*

One: *Un*

French is an official language in more than twenty-five countries, as well as in numerous immigrant communities in the United States and around the world. French is the second most commonly taught second language in the world after English and is the eleventh most common spoken language in the world. There are numerous variations in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, both between and within French-speaking regions. This means that there may be some confusion when you talk to French speakers from different countries, but you should be able to communicate with Francophones (people who speak French fluently and regularly) wherever you go.

without too much difficulty, even if the French you learned is from another region.

French in English

French has had a great deal of influence on English, affecting English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The French influence on English began in 1066 when William the Conqueror led the Norman invasion of England and became king of England. While English was relegated to the language of the masses, French became the language of the court, administration, and culture and would remain that way for 300 years. French and English thus coexisted with no apparent complications; in fact, English was essentially ignored by grammarians during this time and evolved into a grammatically simpler language. As a result of the Norman occupation of England, English adopted about 10,000 French words, of which around three-fourths are still used today.

Fast Fact

More than a third of all English words are derived from French, either directly or indirectly. An English speaker who has never studied French already knows around 15,000 French words.

German

German is an Indo-European language that has evolved over centuries to become part of a larger group of languages called the Germanic languages. German developed on the continent roughly in the territory that is Germany today. Sometime in the fifth century A.D., three large groups from the northern part of modern Germany began to move from their homeland to the island of Britain. The three peoples were the Jutes, the Angles, and the Saxons. They came both as conquerors and immigrants and had an enormous influence on the culture and language of the large region they occupied. Their Germanic language fused with Celtic-English and made English a predominant Germanic language.

German is the dominant language in a large area of northern and central Europe. In addition to Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, it is spoken in Liechtenstein, in the Czech Republic near the German border, and in many cities in Hungary (which was once a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). German is one of the languages used in modern European commerce and is the native language of more European Union (EU) citizens than any other language. Only English is spoken by more EU residents than German. It is also a language in which much of the world's great music and literature has been written.

Fast Fact

No matter how long the number gets, German numbers are written as one word: 701 is written *siebenhunderteins*, the year 1776 is *siebzehnhundertsechundsiebzig*, and 3582 is *dreitausendfünfhundertzweiundachtzig*. For that reason, Germans tend to avoid writing out numbers and prefer to write the numerals.

German has regional pronunciation and even vocabulary differences in some places. The differences are often called dialects, and they are the local variations or peculiarities of the standard language. It is estimated that there are between 50 and 250 dialects (depending on how the term dialect is defined) within the German language. The German alphabet consists of the same letters that make up the English alphabet, with one exception. German has one letter that does not exist in English, called an “ess-tset,” that is often mistaken for a capital “B.” It looks like this (β) and is pronounced like a double “s” (ESS).

There are almost 100 million people who speak German as their first language. Most of them — about 83.5 million people — live in Germany, Switzerland, or Austria, but about 4 million call North and South America home.

KEY PHRASES

English: German

Hello: *Guten Tag*

Goodbye: *Auf Wiedersehen*

My name is: *Mein Name ist*

I would like: *Ich mag würde*

Please: *Bitte*

How much?: *Wie viel?*

Thank you: *Danke*

Excuse me: *Entschuldigung*

Where?: *Wo?*

Left: *Verließ*

Right: *Richtig*

One: *Eins*

Hindi

The Hindi language is a member of the Indo-Aryan group within the Indo-Iranian subgroup of the Indo-European family of languages. It has been the official language of India since 1965, although the Indian constitution recognizes English and twenty-one other languages as official languages. Nearly 425 million people, mostly in India, speak Hindi as a first language and some 120 million more use it as a second language. It's also spoken by large populations in South Africa, Mauritius, Bangladesh, Yemen, and Uganda.

Some linguists consider Hindi (and Urdu) as the written forms of Hindustani; others believe that Hindustani is the spoken version of Hindi and Urdu. Hindi is the version of Hindustani used by Hindus, while Urdu is the variety of Hindustani used by Muslims and is the official language of Pakistan.

Standard Hindi is based on the Kari Boli (Khariboli) dialect spoken to the east and north of Delhi. Braj Bhasha (Brajbhasa) and Bumbaiya (Mumbaiyya) are two other important dialects of the more than ten variations of Hindi. Hindi has roots in classical Sanskrit. It is written using the Devanagari alphabet from Sanskrit and is read from left to right. Because Hindi is phonetic, words are pronounced as they are written, making it easier to learn than English. There are no uppercase or lowercase forms of letters in Hindi. Nouns are either masculine or feminine, and many adjectives vary based on the gender of the noun they modify. Verbs also change to indicate the gender of their subjects. Hindi does not use either definite or indefinite articles.

Fast Fact

The British colonization of India is responsible for the introduction of many Hindi words into English. Some of the words English borrows from Hindi include: *bazaar*, *bungalow*, *coolie*, *guru*, *khaki*, *loot*, and *pundit*.

International Language

An international or universal language is meant to be used as a means of communication by people who natively speak different languages. An international language is not meant to replace existing native languages but rather to serve as a common means of communication. International languages can include artificial languages, national languages used outside their national boundaries, and national languages that have been modified and simplified from their native form.

The need for improved communication has been apparent since people speaking different languages encountered each other. Since the seventeenth century, it has been estimated that several hundred attempts have been made to create international languages. A number of philosophers including Francis Bacon (British, 1561–1626), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (German, 1646–1716), and René Descartes (French, 1596–1650), recognized the need and proposed “philosophical” languages based on logical systems of classification rather than human speech. Several systems of this type using representational signs, were constructed but most people found them too difficult to use and unsuited for conversation.

More successful were artificial languages formed from elements taken from existing languages. One of the first of these artificial systems of communications to receive notice was Volapük, a language created by German Roman Catholic priest Johann Martin Schleyer and introduced in 1880. Volapük used an alphabet, grammar, and vocabulary based on Latin, the Romance languages, and Germanic languages. This language enjoyed some popularity, but it too proved difficult to learn and use. In 1887, Dr. Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, a Polish-Jewish oculist and linguist, introduced Esperanto. Esperanto is arguably the most successful artificial language; it has had more staying power and is still used by an estimated 100,000 speakers. Words in Esperanto are formed by adding elements to root words and are derived from Latin, Greek, and the Romance and Germanic languages. A simplified version of Esperanto, Ido, was introduced in 1907 but failed to replace Esperanto. Yet another artificial language, Interlingua, was introduced in 1951 by the International Auxiliary Language Association. The grammar and vocabulary of Interlingua is based on English and Romance languages.

Natural languages can also serve as international languages. Latin was the universal language of Europe in medieval times, French was known at one time as the universal language of diplomacy, and English may be said to be the language of commerce today. A greatly simplified version of Latin, *Latino Sine Flexione*, was introduced in the early nineteenth century by an Italian mathematician, but was not simple enough to gain acceptance.

Fast Fact

Between 1925 and 1932, the English scholar C.K. Ogden developed Basic English and proposed it as an international secondary language. Basic English has an uncomplicated grammar and a vocabulary of 850 words: 600 nouns, 150 adjectives, and 100 verbs, adverbs, prepositions, and pronouns.

Italian

Italian, like the other Romance languages, is the direct offspring of the Latin spoken by the Romans and imposed by them on the peoples under their dominion. Of all the major Romance languages, Italian retains the closest resemblance to Latin. In the early fourteenth century, written Italian began to take form through the works of **Dante Alighieri** (1265–1321). Best known is his allegorical work *La Divina Commedia* (The Divine Comedy), which Dante began circa 1307 and worked on until his death. In 1525, a Venetian, **Pietro Bembo** (1470–1547) set out his proposals for a standardized language and style. In 1582, a group of Florentine intellectuals, meeting informally between 1570 and 1580, founded the Academy of the Chaff to maintain the purity of the Italian language.

KEY PHRASES

English: Italian

Hello: *Chiao*

Goodbye: *Arrivederchi*

My name is: *Il mio nome è*

I would like: *Vorrei*

Please: *Per favore*

How much?: *Quanto?*

Thank you: *Grazie*

Excuse me: *Scusami*

Where?: *Dove?*

Left: *Sinistra*

Right: *Destra*

One: *Uno*

The unification of Italy in 1861 brought about sweeping social and economic reforms. Amazingly, only 2.5 percent of Italy's population could speak standard Italian at the time of unification. Mandatory schooling and the proliferation of mass communication and mass transit had an enormous impact on the formation of modern standard Italian. Local dialects, characterized as the language of the uneducated, began to fall out of favor in the decades following unification. As Benito Mussolini and his Fascist party rose to power in the early part of the twentieth century, the push toward a common language intensified as he sought to solidify his control over the Italian population.

Fast Fact

L'Accademia della Crusca (Academy of the Chaff) was founded in Florence in 1582 to maintain the purity of the language. Still in existence today, the academy was the first such institution in Europe and the first to produce a modern national language.

Though all Italians receive formal education in modern standard Italian, almost all Italians are bilingual, meaning they speak Italian and their local dialect. There are hundreds of dialects in Italy. For the student of Italian, pure Venetian or Sicilian will be almost incomprehensible. Because of the growing influence of American culture, especially through the media, many English words have found their way into everyday conversation. So many English words have been adopted in Italian that there is a name for them: Itagliano (highly anglicized Italian).

Japanese

Japanese, one of the world's major languages, is spoken by more than 125 million people, ranking ninth in terms of the number of speakers. Most speakers of Japanese live in Japan, but there are also many speakers in Korea, Taiwan, the Ryukyu Islands, and North and South America. Japanese does not appear to be related to any other language and is of uncertain origin. Some consider Japanese one of the Altaic languages, which includes Turkish and Korean, but other hypotheses link it to language groups from South Asia. It also may be a hybrid, drawing influences from both.

There are three categories of words in Japanese of which native words are the most numerous. Next are words originally borrowed in earlier history from Chinese, followed by the smallest, but rapidly increasing, category of words borrowed from Western languages such as English or other Asian languages. Word order in Japanese is usually subject-object-verb, although words can change position without altering a sentence's meaning. The verb always occurs at the end of a sentence, however. Japanese verbs are also characterized by their lack of number or gender; the same form is used with singular and plural subjects, and no distinction is made for gender.

Japanese is considered an agglutinating language, in which different linguistic elements — particles, auxiliary verbs, and auxiliary adjectives — are joined to form one word. English may require several separate verbs, for example, to express a complete idea, while the Japanese version may use one complex verb. Other agglutinative languages include Korean, Turkish, and Navaho.

Written Japanese

Japanese writing uses two systems for Chinese characters, or kanji, and syllabaries. Chinese characters were introduced to Japan about 1,500 years ago. Because each character is associated with an idea, tens of thousands of characters were in use. In 1946, the Japanese government identified 1,850 characters for daily use and increased the list to 1,945 characters in 1981. Each syllabary, or kana, in the syllabary system represents a sound rather than a meaning. There are two types of kana, however, each containing the same set of sounds. It is not uncommon to find kanji and both types of kana in the same sentence.

Fast Fact

Prior to the introduction of Chinese characters about 1,500 years ago, Japanese was strictly a spoken language.

Portuguese

Portuguese is a member of the Romance group of the Italic subfamily of the Indo-European family languages. It ranks as the fifth most commonly spoken language, and more than 170 million people primarily in Brazil, Portugal, the Portuguese Atlantic islands, and former Portuguese colonies in Africa and Asia, speak it natively.

Like other Romance languages, Portuguese developed from Vulgar Latin brought to the Iberian Peninsula by the Romans in the third century B.C. People of Germanic origin invaded Iberia between A.D. 400 and 700 as the Roman Empire was collapsing and Europe entered the Dark Ages. Populations were isolated and languages evolved independently from one another. Evidence of Portuguese distinct from its Latin roots can be found before the eleventh century.

There are four major dialects in Portuguese: Northern Portuguese or Galician, Central Portuguese, Southern Portuguese (which includes the dialect of Lisbon), and Insular Portuguese (which includes Brazilian Portuguese). The two officially used dialects are Lisbon and Brazilian. A 1990 act simplified the spelling of European and Brazilian Portuguese and in 2008, the Portuguese government agreed to standardize the language on the Brazilian form.

The language uses an alphabet of twenty-six letters, and *K*, *W*, and *Y* were added by the 1990 Portuguese Language Orthographic Agreement. There are also twelve characters with diacritics, but these are not considered as independent letters. All nouns in Portuguese indicate a gender, as do most adjectives and pronouns.

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