



European Day of Languages

26 September

[www.coe.int/EDL](http://www.coe.int/EDL)

## The celebration of linguistic diversity

---

Council of Europe, Strasbourg

### The human condition

Our planet has over six billion people who speak between 6 000 and 7 000 different languages. A few languages are spoken by hundreds of millions of speakers, such as English or Chinese, but most are spoken by only a few thousand, or just a handful of speakers. In fact, 96% of the world's languages are spoken by just 4% of the people.

Europeans often feel their continent to have an exceptional number of languages, especially when compared to North America or Australia. Yet, only 3% of the world's total, some 225 languages, are indigenous to Europe. Most of the world's languages are spoken in a broad area on either side of the Equator - in southeast Asia, India, Africa, and South America.

Many Europeans may think that a monolingual way of life is the norm. But between a half and two-thirds of the world's population is bilingual to some degree, and a significant number are plurilingual. Plurilingualism is much more the normal human condition than monolingualism.

Diversity of languages and of cultures, as in the case of biodiversity, is increasingly being seen as a good and beautiful thing in itself. Each language has its own way of seeing the world and is the product of its own particular history. All languages have their individual identity and value, and all are equally adequate as modes of expression for the people who use them. We know from comparisons of the rates at which children learn to speak, that no language is intrinsically more difficult than any other language.

### The structure of language

Language is an arbitrary system of sounds and symbols which is used for many purposes by a group of people, chiefly to communicate with each other, to express cultural identity, to convey social relationships, and to provide a source of delight (for example, in literature). Languages differ from each other in their sounds, grammar, vocabulary, and patterns of discourse. But all languages are highly complex entities.

Languages vary in the number of their vowel and consonant sounds from less than a dozen to over a hundred. European languages tend to have inventories in the middle range – from around 25 such sounds (e.g. Spanish) to over 60 (e.g. Irish). Alphabets reflect these sounds with varying degrees of accuracy: some alphabets (e.g. Welsh) are very regular in the way they symbolise sounds; others (e.g. English) are very irregular.

Within grammar, each language comprises several thousand points of word formation and sentence construction. Each language has a huge vocabulary available to meet the needs of its users – in the case of European languages, where scientific and technical vocabulary is very large, this reaches several hundred thousand words and phrases.

Individual speakers know and use only a fraction of a language's total vocabulary. The words educated people use – their active vocabulary – can reach some 50,000 words; the words they know but do not use – their passive vocabulary – is somewhat larger. In everyday conversation, people often make use of a small number of words, but with great frequency. It has been estimated that a 21-year-old has already uttered some 50 million words.

Living languages and cultures are constantly changing. People influence each other in the way they speak and write. New media, such as the Internet, give languages fresh opportunities to grow. Languages are always in contact with each other, and affect each other in many ways, especially by borrowing words. English, for example, has over the centuries borrowed from over 350 languages, and European languages are all currently borrowing many words from English.



## Language acquisition

The task of learning the mother tongue is one which we accomplish essentially in the first five years of life, though certain features of language (such as vocabulary acquisition) continue indefinitely. Language develops through several stages. During the first year the baby makes a wide range of vocalisations, out of which emerge the rhythm and intonation patterns, and then the vowels and consonants. Around one year the first understandable words are uttered. During the second year two-word combinations follow, moving slowly to three- and four-word combinations. Three and four-year-olds use increasingly longer and complex sentences. Vocabulary grows from some 50 active words by 18 months to several thousand words by age five.

The mother tongue is usually described as an individual's first learned or primary language. This is the language people know best, the language they use most, or the language with which they most closely identify. With some bilingual people, two languages have been learned so closely together that it is impossible to choose between them, in terms of "first" or "second" languages. With most bilinguals, however, the distinction is clearer, as the learning of a second or third language takes place in school or later in life. There is no absolute age limit beyond which it is impossible to learn another language.

Bilingualism is a complex phenomenon. A common myth is that a bilingual person has two equally developed languages; in reality, bilinguals rarely display a balance between their two languages. Another myth is that all bilinguals are the same in their abilities; in reality, they display many kinds of bilingualism. Some sound like native speakers in both their languages; others have a strong foreign accent in one. Some can read well in both languages; others can do so only in one. Some prefer to write in one language, but can only talk in another.

Bilingualism brings all kinds of benefits. Being bilingual can enhance your chances of successfully learning other languages. Somehow, the learning of a third language is facilitated by the learning of a second. Bilinguals may also have some advantages in thinking: there is evidence that they make faster progress than monolinguals in certain areas of early cognitive development and are in many ways more creative in their linguistic skills.

Bilinguals have the great advantage of being able to communicate with a wider variety of people. Because bilinguals have the opportunity of experiencing two or more cultures in an intimate way, their ability can lead to more sensitivity in communication and a readiness to overcome cultural barriers and to build cultural bridges. There are also important practical issues: bilinguals have a potential economic advantage because a larger number of jobs becomes available to them. It is also increasingly accepted that multilingual companies have a competitive edge over monolingual ones.

## Language families

Languages are related to each other like the members of a family. Most of the languages of Europe can be grouped together, because of their common origins, as a single, large Indo-European language family. The families in Europe with the most member-languages and the most speakers are the Germanic, Romance, and Slavic.

The Germanic language family has a northern branch with Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic and Faroese, as well as a western branch with German, Dutch, Frisian, English and Yiddish as its members. The Romance language family has as its members Romanian, Italian, Corsican, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Occitan, French, Romansh, Ladin and Sardinian. To the Slavic language family belong languages such as Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Polish, Sorbian, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian and Bulgarian. Within the Celtic family are Irish, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, and Breton, with revival movements under way for Cornish and Manx. To the Baltic family belong Latvian and Lithuanian. Separate families with only one member are Greek, Albanian and Armenian. Basque is an exceptional case, because it does not belong to the Indo-European family and its origins are unknown.

Other language families also have members in Europe. In the North we find the Uralic languages: Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, several Sámi languages, as well as other small languages in the northern parts of the Russian Federation such as Ingrian or Karelian. In the Southeast we find representatives of the Altaic language family, notably Turkish and Azerbaijani. The Caucasian family is spoken in a relatively small and compact area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, and comprises also about 40 members, among them Georgian, and Abkhaz. The Afro-Asiatic family includes Maltese, Hebrew and Berber.

All these languages use a small number of alphabetic scripts. Most languages use the Roman (or Latin) alphabet. Russian and some other Slavic languages use Cyrillic. Greek, Yiddish, Armenian and Georgian each have their own script. Non-European languages widely used on European territory include Arabic, Chinese and Hindi, each with its own writing system.

## The languages of Europe

Estimates vary but there are about 225 spoken indigenous languages. The five languages spoken by most people in Europe are, by number of mother tongue speakers, Russian, German, English, French and Italian. But most European countries operate routinely with several languages.

The exceptions are small states such as Liechtenstein and the Holy See (Vatican), and even in these places we find significant use of second languages.

The 47 states parties to the European Cultural Convention have around 40 "state" languages and many accord special status to other languages.

Most countries have a number of traditionally spoken minority or regional languages. The Russian Federation has by far the highest number of languages spoken on its territory; the number varies from 130 to 200 depending on the criteria.

Some regional and minority languages have obtained official status, for example, Basque, Catalan and Galician in the regions of Spain in which they are spoken. Welsh has protective language rights in the United Kingdom, as does Frisian in the Netherlands and the Sámi languages in Norway, Sweden and Finland.

Due to the influx of migrants and refugees from all over the world, Europe has become increasingly multilingual. London, for example, has more than 300 languages spoken as a home language. Most other larger cities, particularly in western Europe, easily have 100-200 languages spoken as mother tongues by their school populations. The most common languages include Arabic, Berber Turkish, Kurdish, Hindi, Punjabi, and Chinese. However, many of these languages are spoken by small minorities, and their future is under threat.

Daily, informal, oral interaction between parents and children is crucial to the survival of a language. Experts have estimated that over this century at least half of the world's languages, and perhaps more, will die out. Within two generations all traces of a language can disappear when children are no longer raised in it.

The reasons for giving up a language are manifold, and include the physical destruction (through environmental crisis and disease) of a community or its habitat, active antagonism by political groups, and – the commonest cause - economic and cultural domination by more powerful and prestigious languages. But whatever the reason, the result is the same: the loss to humanity of a unique resource.

Through the work of the Council of Europe, two important international instruments came into force in 1998. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is in force in 11 countries; the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities which includes some provisions for minority languages, is in force in over 30 European countries. These treaties are important in protecting and promoting the linguistic wealth of Europe.

At the beginning of the 21st century all European citizens live in a multilingual environment. In their daily lives citizens come across many different languages, for example on a bus or a train, through TV, radio or newspapers, or the ingredients on a product in the supermarket.

There is a need to increase popular knowledge and understanding of the diversity of the languages of Europe, and of the factors affecting their maintenance and growth. There is a need to generate a greater interest in and curiosity about languages. There is a need to enhance linguistic tolerance within and between nations.

These are just some of the aims of the European Year of Languages 2001 which is organised by the Council of Europe and the European Union.

**Language Policy Division**

DG IV

**COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

F-67075 STRASBOURG CEDEX – France

Tel: + 33 3 88 41 32 48

Fax: + 33 3 88 41 27 06

e-mail: [decs-lang@coe.int](mailto:decs-lang@coe.int)

[www.coe.int/lang/](http://www.coe.int/lang/)

The Council of Europe declared 26th September *European Day of Languages*

[www.coe.int/EDL](http://www.coe.int/EDL)

*The World Wide Web has many sites on languages, diversity of languages, multilingualism, language learning, etc. Below is just a small selection (most of these sites will lead you further by following their collections of links).*

Council of Europe: [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int)

Council of Europe Language Policy Division, Strasbourg: <http://culture.coe.fr/lang/index.html>

European Centre for Modern Languages, Graz: <http://www.ecml.at/>

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages: [www.coe.int/minlang](http://www.coe.int/minlang)

European Commission: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/languages/index.html>

European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages: <http://www.eblul.org>

European Centre for Minority Issues: <http://www.ecmi.de/>

European Language Council: <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~elc/>

Linguistic Rights (Most Clearinghouse): <http://www.unesco.org/most/ln2lin.htm>

European Research Centre on Migration and Ethnic Relations: <http://www.ercomer.org/>

Youth of European Nationalities: <http://oehinfo.uibk.ac.at/misc/jev/>

Ethnologue database (6,700 languages of the world): <http://www.sil.org/ethnologue/>

Languages on the web (over 30.000 links): <http://www.languages-on-the-web.com>

Human Languages Page: <http://www.june29.com/HLP/>

Linguist-list: <http://linguistlist.org/>

Computer E-mail Lists for Individual Languages: <http://www.egt.ie/langlist.html>

Yamada WWW Language resources: <http://babel.uoregon.edu/yamada/guides.html>

Central site of Mercator centres: <http://www.mercator-central.org>; Mercator Education: <http://www.mercator-education.org>

Foreign language Resources: <http://www.itp.berkeley.edu/~thorne/HumanResources.html>

Eric Clearinghouse on languages and linguistics: <http://www.cal.org/ericcl/>

University of Cambridge Language Centre: <http://www.langcen.cam.ac.uk/>

Frequently asked questions about linguistics: <http://www.zompist.com/langfaq.html>

Dictionaries (1500 in 230 languages): <http://www.yourdictionary.com/>

Or, similarly dictionaries at: <http://www.dictionary.com/>

Other dictionary (reference to international organisations): <http://eurodic.ip.lu/cgi-bin/edicbin/EuroDicWWW.pl>

Tongue twisters, with 1842 entries in 75 languages: <http://www.uebersetzung.at/twister/>

Sounds of the world's animals: <http://www.georgetown.edu/cball/animals/animals.html>

The Lord's Prayer in 1116 languages and dialects: <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/pater/>

How to say "I love you" in various languages: <http://www.worldpath.net/~hiker/iloveyou.html>