Survey of the world's languages

The languages of the world can be divided into a number of families of related languages, possibly grouped into larger stocks, plus a residue of isolates, languages that appear not to be genetically related to any other known languages, languages that form one-member families on their own. The number of families, stocks, and isolates is hotly disputed. The disagreements centre around differences of opinion as to what constitutes a family or stock, as well as the acceptable criteria and methods for establishing them.

Linguists are sometimes divided into lumpers and splitters according to whether they lump many languages together into large stocks, or divide them into numerous smaller family groups. Merritt Ruhlen is an extreme lumper: in his classification of the world's languages (1991) he identifies just nineteen language families or stocks, and five isolates. More towards the splitting end is *Ethnologue*, which identifies some 153 top-level "families", including one constructed language, 157 sign languages, 92 creoles, 16 pidgins, 25 mixed languages, 14 isolates, and 48 unclassified languages. Aside from the fact that many of these groupings (e.g. sign languages, creoles, pidgins, mixed languages) are not genetic, in terms of what has actually been established by application of the comparative method, the *Ethnologue* system is wildly lumping! *Glottolog* is even more extreme, identifying 429 family-like groupings (which also include sign languages and mixed languages).

Some families, for instance Austronesian and Indo-European, are well established, and few serious doubts exist as to their genetic unity. Others are quite contentious. Both Ruhlen (1991) and *Ethnologue* identify an Australian family, although there is as yet no conclusive evidence that the languages of the continent are all genetically related. At least as contentious is Joseph Greenberg's (1987) putative Amerind stock of Native American languages.

In what follows we present a survey the languages of the world, organized on a regional basis. We adopt a conservative (splitting) approach, distinguishing well attested families, commenting here and there on possible larger genetic groupings.

Europe and neighbouring parts of Asia

Indo-European

The Indo-European languages have been recognized as forming a family since at least the late seventeenth century, when Andreas Jäger observed in 1686 that Persian and many of the languages of Europe are descendants of a single language. Since Jäger's time, many more languages have been shown to belong to the family. Indeed, Indo-European languages are spoken throughout most of Europe, across Iran, through Central Asia, and into India. With the European colonial expansions of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, they spread into the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, Africa and Asia, in the process, diversifying into numerous dialects. They have become major languages in many of the former colonies, and are spoken by over three billion (i.e. 3×10^9) speakers.

The family consists of just over four hundred languages (448 according to the 25th edition of *Ethnologue*), which can be grouped together into a number of subfamilies or branches, as shown in the family tree representation of Figure 1 repeated from the textbook. Map 1 also repeated from the book, shows the approximate locations of some of the main groups.

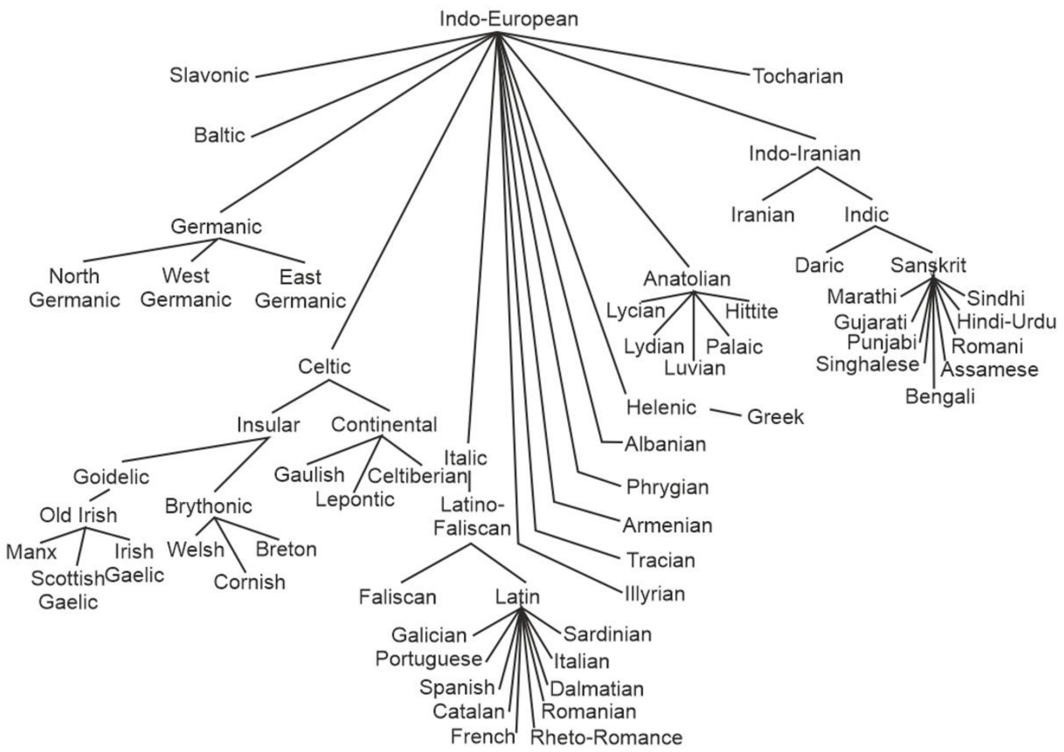


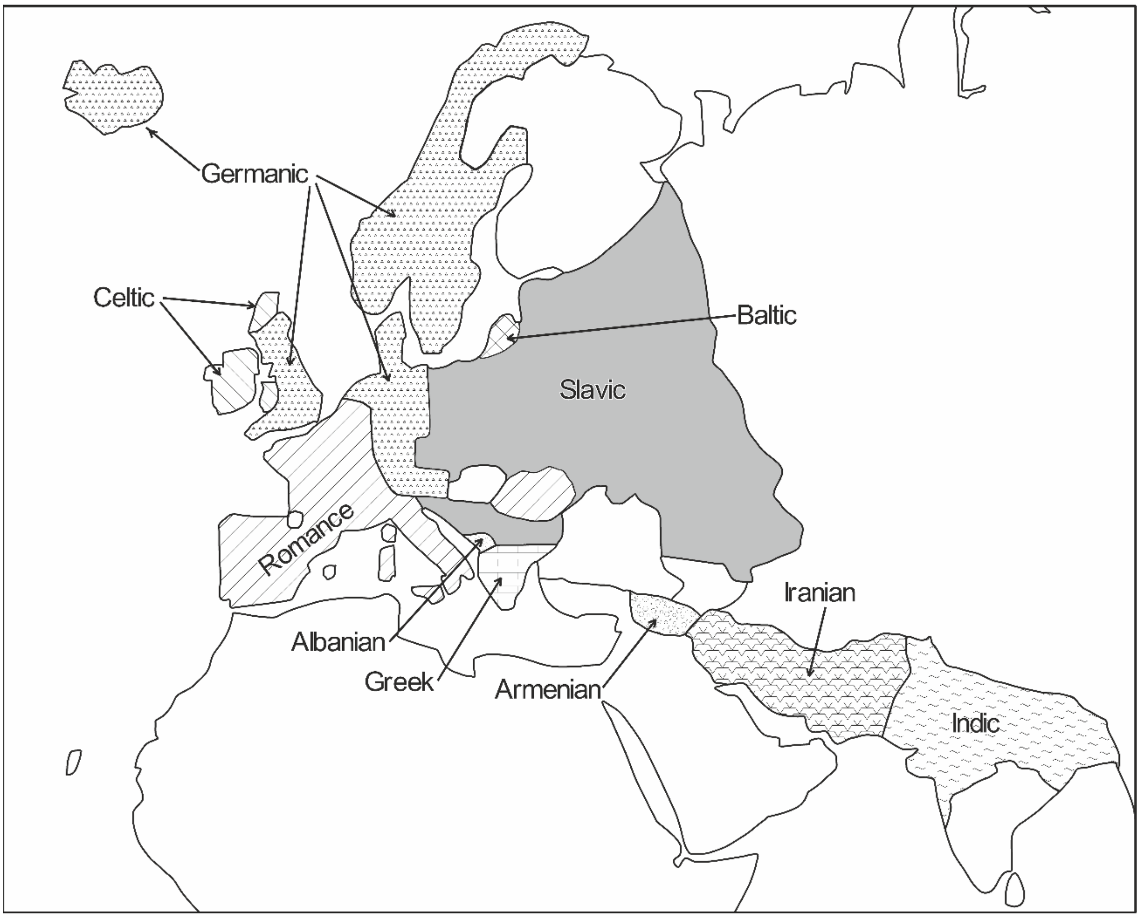
Figure 1. The Indo-European family tree

More historical-comparative work has been done on Indo-European than any other language family, and many lexemes have been reconstructed for proto-Indo-European, as well as some of its grammar. Proto-Indo-European was an inflecting language (like ancient Indo-European languages such as Latin, Hittite and Ancient Greek), with a complex verbal system with different inflections for different persons and numbers of the subject, tense, aspect, mood, as well as case-marking for nouns.

A range of proposals have been made for the origins and early spread of the Indo-European family. The Kurgan or steppe hypothesis is the currently favoured hypothesis. It identifies the speakers as members of a Kurgan culture, and places the homeland of

Proto-Indo-European in the steppe region north of the Black Sea about six thousand years ago. From there the language may have spread out with the domestication of the horse and the invention of the wheel (Anthony 2007), fragmenting into numerous mutually unintelligible languages as it spread to the east and west. Supporting this hypothesis is genetic evidence of a substantial population movement out of the steppe region at around the predicted time.

The major alternative scenario has it that Proto-Indo-European was spoken further to the south, in the region of in present-day Turkey, some six to eight thousand years ago. The archaeologist Colin Renfrew proposed (1987, 1989) that the Indo-European languages spread with agriculture from a centre in Anatolia, beginning some six to eight thousand years ago. The current consensus is that this hypothesis is incompatible with the linguistic and genetic evidence.



Map 1. Location of the main groups of the Indo-European family prior to the sixteenth century

Uralic

The much smaller Uralic family consists of some thirty-eight languages, of which Finnish and Hungarian are the best-known members. Uralic languages were probably once spoken over a large area in the north-east of Europe and the south-west of Asia, but were split up by intrusions of speakers of Indo-European and Altaic languages, leaving many of them geographically isolated. Hungarian is geographically separated from its relatives as a result of migrations beginning in about the sixth century CE, and continuing until about the eleventh century.

The Uralic family splits into Finno-Ugric and Samoyedic. Finno-Ugric is further divided into a number of branches, including Balto-Finnic (e.g. Finnish and Estonian), Saamic (various Saami languages), and Ugric (Hungarian and Khanty (Ob Ugric)). Samoyedic consists of just six languages spoken by small numbers of speakers on the northern fringe of Eurasia.

Altaic

Altaic is an uncertain grouping of at least three relatively well established families, Turkic, Tungusic and Mongolic. According to some, Korean and Japanese also belong to this genetic group, although this is contested; more usually Korean and Japanese are taken to be language isolates, although according to *Glottolog*, Japanese belongs to a small language family (Japonic).

Turkic languages are spoken in a discontinuous region extending from the Balkans in the west through the Caucasus and into Central Asia and Siberia. Turkish (Turkey), Turkmen (Turkmenistan, Iran, Afghanistan), Tatar (Volga) and Uzbek (Uzbekistan) are members of this family, although the classification of the languages is not without problems.

The Tungusic family consists of a number of languages spoken by small numbers of speakers scattered over sparsely populated areas of eastern Siberia, Sakhalin Island and nearby parts of China and Mongolia. The highly endangered language Manchu is a Tungusic language.

Mongolic languages, of which *Ethnologue* lists thirteen, are spoken in Mongolia and adjacent parts of Russia and China. With about two and a half million speakers, Mongolian is the largest language in this group.

Other languages of the region

Also spoken in this large region are languages of the Caucasian families and the Chukotko-Kamchatkan family. Caucasian languages are spoken in the Caucasus region, along with Indo-European and Turkic languages. It is currently believed that Caucasian languages are constituted by two or three different families: Kartvelian (Southern Caucasian), spoken in Georgia and Turkey, and including Georgian; Northwest Caucasian spoken in the northwest of Georgia, and including Abkhaz; and Northeast Caucasian spoken in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Daghestan, and including Chechen. The Chukotko-Kamchatkan family is a small family of languages spoken on the two peninsulas with these names in far north-east Siberia. All of these languages are endangered, including the best known of them, Chukchi.

A number of language isolates are or were spoken in the regions covered in this section, including Basque (in the Pyrenees on the border of France and Spain), Etruscan (an extinct language spoken in northern Italy), Ket (spoken in western Siberia, and the only surviving member of the Yeniseian family),[1] Yukaghir (in northeast Russia, and believed by some to be related to Uralic), Nivkh or Gilyak (spoken on Sakhalin Island and nearby parts of the mainland) and Ainu (today spoken mainly on Hokkaido, the northern island of Japan).

Larger groupings?

According to one proposal, Indo-European, Uralic, Altaic, Afroasiatic (see pp. 000–000 of the textbook and below), Kartvelian, Dravidian, possibly as well as others, form a single genetic family, dubbed Nostratic. A similar suggestion by Joseph Greenberg groups the first three of the languages together with Chukotko-Kamchatkan and Eskimo-Aleut in a Eurasiatic family. Neither proposal is widely accepted.

Africa and southwest Asia

Afroasiatic

Afroasiatic consists of almost 400 languages (according to Glottolog) spoken in northern Africa and southwest Asia by over 500 million people – see Map 2. It is regarded as the best established of the four families that African languages are sometimes divided into; the other three families are Niger-Congo (on which see next subsection), the more contentious Nilo-Saharan and the highly contentious Khoisan (see below). Nonetheless, reconstruction of Proto-Afroasiatic is largely absent.

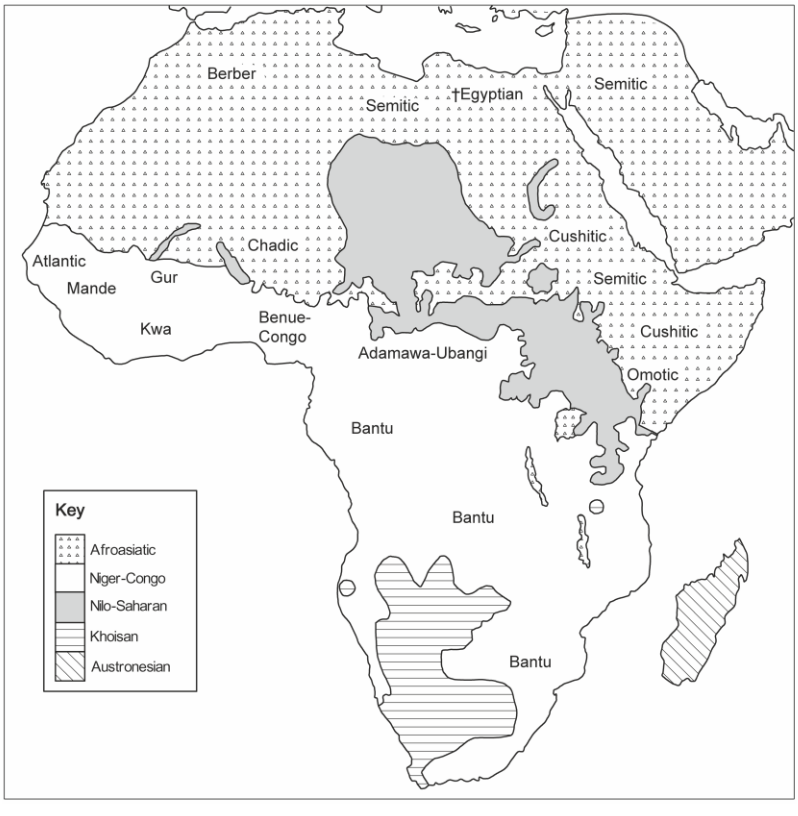
Afroasiatic is generally divided into six groups: Berber (consisting of around 30 languages spoken in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Mali, including Tamazight, Zenaga, and Kabyle); Chadic (made up of nearly 200 languages spoken in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, including Hausa, Miya, and Ngizim); Cushitic (with about 50 languages in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Kenya and Tanzania, including Somali, Dahalo and Afar); Egyptian (one language, Coptic, which became extinct in the fourteenth century, though it is still used as a language of religion); Semitic (consisting of some 80 languages spoken in Ethiopia and the Middle East, including Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Amharic and Tigré); and Omotic (with 30 or so languages spoken mainly in Ethopia, including Dizi, Bench and Ganza).

Semitic is the only group spoken widely outside of Africa. It is also the best-

[1] Vajda (2010), however, argues for a genetic link between Yeniseian and the Na-Dene family of North America.

studied group. A notable feature of Semitic languages is a root structure consisting of three consonants; grammatical information is expressed largely through intervening vowels. For instance, the root form for 'book' in Arabic is *k-t-b*; thus *kitab* 'book', and *kutub* 'books'.

There is no consensus on when or where Proto-Afroasiatic was spoken. Estimates of when the language was spoken vary widely from 12,000 to 18,000 years before the present, making it a significantly more ancient language than Proto-Indo-European. It is generally agreed that the homeland of Proto-Afroasiatic was somewhere in northeast Africa, though where in this vast region is a matter of disagreement. An alternative view, not so widely accepted, is that the homeland was instead in the Levant (on the Eurasian continent), and that the languages spread with agriculture into Africa. This would be consistent with the later date for Proto-Afroasiatic. However, against this hypothesis is the lack of shared agricultural vocabulary across the family, and the fact that northeast Africa is the region of greatest diversity.



Map 2. Approximate locations of the putative language families of Africa

Niger-Congo

Consisting of something over 1,500 languages, the Niger-Congo family is the largest language family in Africa, indeed in the world. This must be tempered by the observation that it is hypothetical, and a number of linguists have expressed doubt concerning its status as a genetic unit. It is accepted as a genetic unit by *Ethnologue*, but not by *Glottolog*, which distinguishes nine separate family groups: Atlantic-Congo (the core of Niger-Congo), Mande, Dogon, Ijoid, Lafofa, Katla-Tima, Heiban, Narrow Talodi and Rashad. Disagreements are partly because the proto-Niger-Congo has not been reconstructed, and thus the genetic unity of the languages is not an established fact.

Niger-Congo languages are spoken over a vast area of the African continent, as shown in Map 2 and at least 600 million speakers, possibly as many as 700 million.

The composition of the putative family is controversial, and has been revised more than once. An idea of the structure of the family is shown in the tree of Figure 2. Note that some nodes on this tree represent individual languages (e.g. Pre/Bɛrɛ), some represent small groups of languages (like Dogon), while others represent enormous groups (e.g. Bantoid).

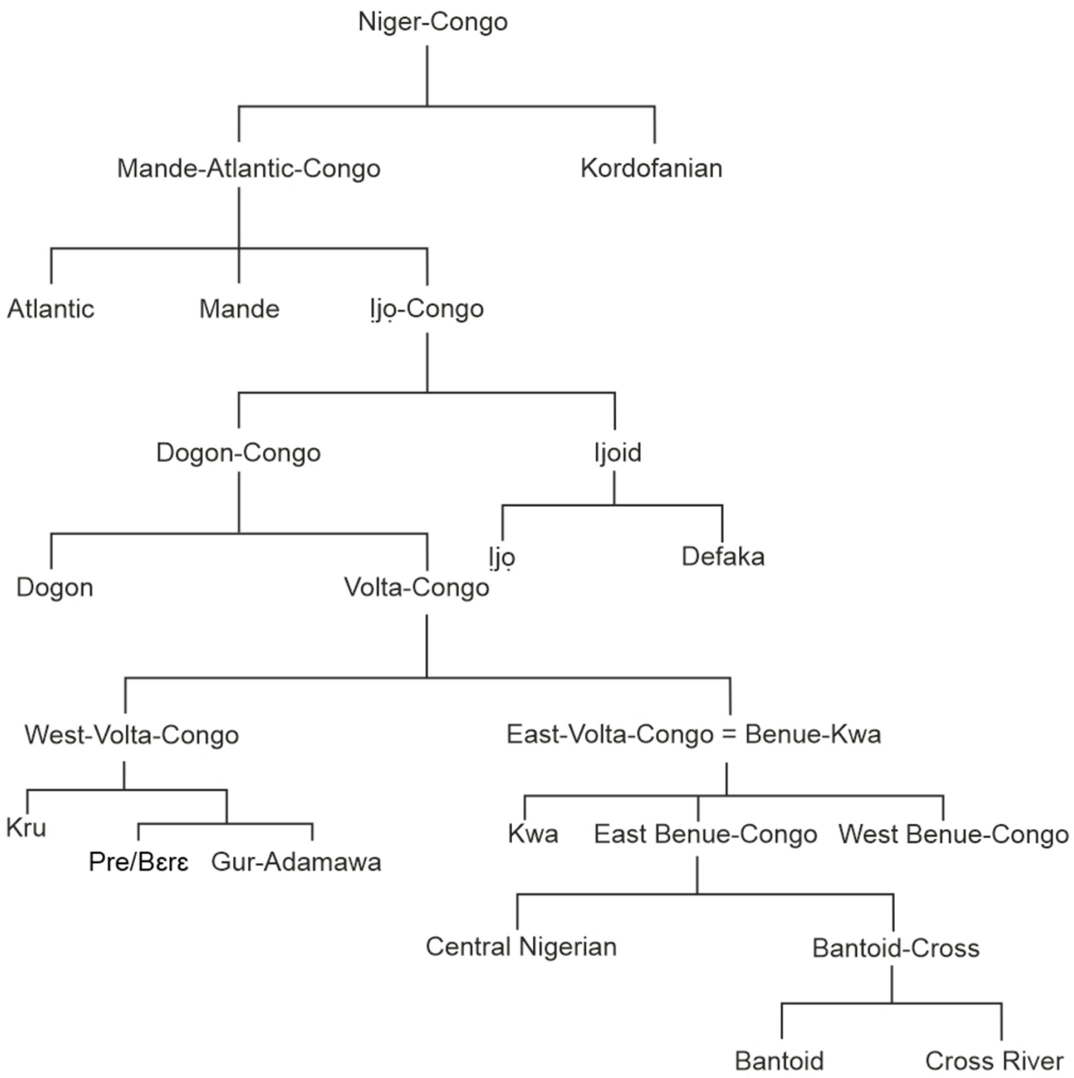


Figure 2. Some major groupings within the Niger-Congo family

The well-known Bantu languages are a subgroup of the Bantoid group (bottom right of Figure 17.2). They comprise between 400 and 700 languages (including Swahili, Xhosa, Fang, Setswana, Zulu, Southern Sotho, Luganda and Shona), with perhaps 350 million speakers. It is believed that Bantu is a relatively young group that began diverging when speakers spread out from Cameroon perhaps 4,000–5,000 years ago. (Some sources suggest a much later date, 2,500–3,000 years before present.) Bantu speaking people migrated eastwards and southwards, taking West African yam agriculture with them. Today Bantu languages are spoken across a third of the African continent.

One well-known characteristic of Niger-Congo languages is their possession of an elaborate system of noun classes (see note 2, Chapter 7), distinguishing humans, animals, plants, masses and liquids, abstracts and so on. The classes are marked by affixes, usually prefixes, that occur sometimes on the noun, but usually on adjectives and verbs in agreement with the noun they apply to, as shown by the following example, where *ki*- and -*ki* are the class markers:

(1)	***ki***-*tu*	*hi*-***ki***	***ki***-*kubwa*	***ki***-*lianguka*	Swahili
	ki-thing	this-ki	ki-large	ki-fell	
	‘This large thing fell.’				

Nilo-Saharan

The Nilo-Saharan grouping, consisting of some two hundred languages, is generally regarded as more controversial than either Afroasiatic or Niger-Congo. Figure 3 shows some of the main groups within the putative Nilo-Saharan family.

A few linguists have proposed a single genetic family consisting of Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo. Thus, according to a suggestion by Roger Blench (1999), the entire Niger-Congo family fits under a single low node in the Nilo-Saharan family tree.

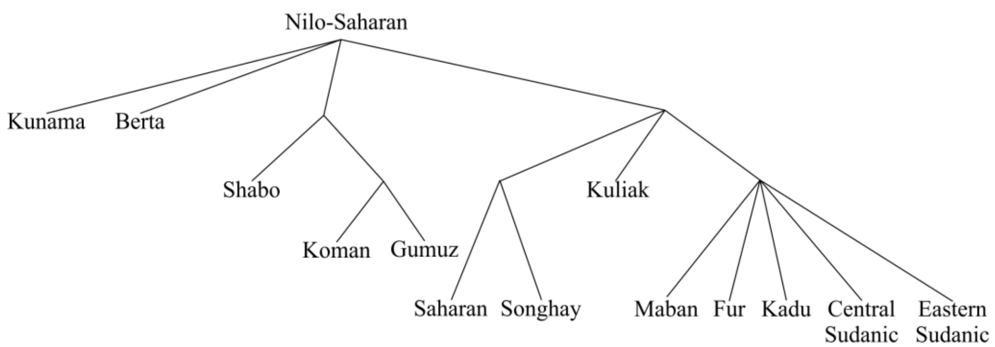
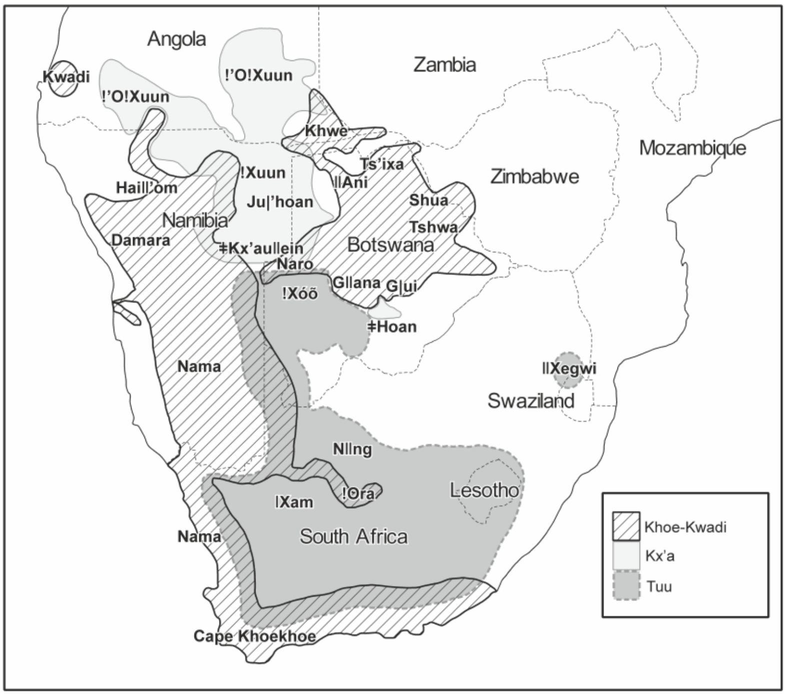


Figure 3. Possible structure of the Nilo-Saharan family

Khoisan

The term Khoisan (also spelt Khoesan) is a cover term for a group of languages of Africa that have clicks as part of their normal phoneme inventory, but are not Bantu (Niger-Congo) or Cushitic (Afroasiatic). Greenberg's classification of African languages (1963) identified Khoisan as one of four genetic macro-units covering the continent. However, there is no evidence that the languages form a genetic unit, and specialists use the label Khoisan as a convenience label for a residue class of languages that don't fit into the better supported family units.

Those spoken in southern Africa are generally accepted by experts as comprising three distinct genetic lineages (e.g. Vossen 2013: 3): Khoe-Kwadi (about fourteen languages, including Haiǁom, Nama-Damara, Khwe, Shua, Ts'ixa and Kwadi),[2] Kx'a (around half a dozen languages, including Ju|'hoan, N!aqriaxe and ǂKx'auǁ'ein) and Tuu (about six to ten languages, including !Xóõ, Nǁng and ǁXegwi). shows the locations of many southern African Khoisan languages. Whereas earlier versions of *Ethnologue* identified a Khoisan family, the current edition recognizes the above three genetic lineages.



Map 3. Location of Khoisan languages of southern Africa

Khoisan also includes two languages spoken far to the north, in Tanzania, Hadza and Sandawe. Current consensus among experts is that Hadza and Sandawe are language isolates (*Ethnologue* agrees); there is however some evidence that Sandawe may be very

[2] Kwadi is an extinct language of which very little is known. Available evidence suggests that it belongs in a genetic group with Khoe languages (Güldemann 2004).

distantly related to Khoe-Kwadi.

Khoisan languages are famous for their possession of click consonants. Some languages, for instance !Xóõ – the language with allegedly the largest known consonant inventory in the world, with well over 100 distinct consonant phonemes – distinguish five different click phonemes, bilabial (ʘ), dental (ǀ), (post)alveolar (!), palatal (ǂ) and lateral (ǁ). Each of the clicks may be accompanied by some further modification by changes to the manner of the velar or uvular closure. (Check your understanding of click articulation, p. 000.) In !Xóõ each click admits up to sixteen accompaniments, including voicing, aspiration, nasalization and glottalization. Vowel systems in Khoisan languages may distinguish as many as five phonemic vowel qualities. Almost all Khoisan languages show distinctive nasalization of vowels; in addition, glottalized, breathy and pharyngealized vowels are commonly phonemic.

Southern and eastern Asia

Dravidian

The approximately seventy-five Dravidian languages are spoken mainly in India, but also in Pakistan and Nepal; they are the dominant languages of Southern India. The family is divided into four groups: Northern (e.g. Brahui, with 2 million speakers in Pakistan, and Nepali; Kurux with some 28,000 speakers in Nepal); Central (all with smallish numbers of speakers, including Northwestern and Southeastern Kolami, with about 50,000 and 10,000 speakers, respectively); South-Central (e.g. Telugu with about 70 million speakers); and Southern (e.g. Tamil with around 60 million speakers, and Malayalam with about 35 million).

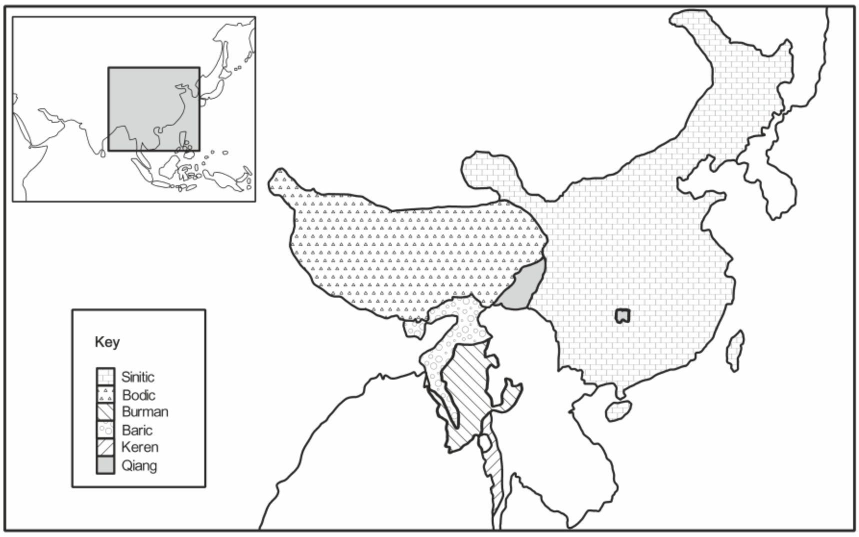
Austro-Asiatic

Austro-Asiatic languages are spoken from eastern India to Vietnam, and south into Malaysia, though interspersed amongst other more widely spoken languages. There are two main branches. In the west is the Munda group (21 languages), spoken in eastern India and neighbouring regions. Mundari and Santali are among the few Munda languages with fairly large communities of speakers, around 2 and 5 million respectively. In the east are the Mon-Khmer languages, which number almost 150, and occur in greatest concentration in Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Except for Vietnamese and Khmer (Cambodia), Mon-Khmer languages have few speakers.

Sino-Tibetan

Comprising over 400 languages, Sino-Tibetan is the second largest language family of the world in terms of numbers of speakers, with a bit under half the number of speakers of Indo-European. The Sino-Tibetan family includes Mandarin Chinese, the language with the largest number of native speakers.

Sino-Tibetan falls into two subgroups. One, Sinitic, consists of around 16 languages, including Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese (Yue), Hakka, Northern Min, Southern Min and Gan. The other group, Tibeto-Burman, has almost 450 languages, mainly spoken in China, Nepal and India. Groupings within Tibeto-Burman include, according to the traditional classification: Baric (e.g. Meithei in India), Bodic (e.g. Tibetan), Burmese-Lolo (e.g. Burmese), Keren (various Keren languages spoken in Myanmar and Thailand, the most widely spoken being S'gaw Karen), Nung (e.g. Norra, Nung) and Qiang (e.g. Northern and Southern Qiang, spoken in China). Map 4 shows the approximate location of the family and some of its subgroups.



Map 4. Location of the Sino-Tibetan family

With the exception of Baric languages, Sino-Tibetan languages are mainly tone languages. Tone cannot, however, be reconstructed for proto-Sino-Tibetan. Rather, certain syllabic endings of the proto-language gave rise to the tones of most modern languages.

Other languages of southern and eastern Asia

Tai-Kadai is a family of some 70 languages spoken in southeastern Asia, mainly in China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, although a few are spoken in India and Myanmar. It is divided into three groups, Hlai, Kadai, and Kam-Tai. Thai (Thailand) and Lao (Laos) have the largest numbers of speakers. The Hmong-Mien (or Miao-Yao) family, consisting of some 30 languages spoken mainly in southern China and into Vietnam, is divided into two groups, Hmong and Mien. Hmong-Mien languages have smallish numbers of speakers; Hmong Njua is the most widely spoken language, with about a million speakers.

Language isolates in the region include Burushaski (northern Pakistan) and Nihali (central India, not to be confused with Nahali, an Indo-European language). Elamite, an extinct language spoken in southwestern Iran around 1000 BCE and Sumerian, believed to have been the first language ever to have been written, are both of uncertain genetic lineage, although some regard Elamite as related to Dravidian.

Oceania

Austronesian

Austronesian is the largest universally accepted language family in the world with over 1,200 languages, spoken by almost 400 million people from Madagascar in the west to Easter Island in the east, Taiwan in the north and New Zealand in the south, with the exception of Australia and much of the island of New Guinea. (The Niger-Congo family (see pp. 000–000) is the only larger family, but it is more contentious.)

As is the case for Indo-European, a good deal of Proto-Austronesian has been reconstructed. There are, however, differences of opinion concerning how the family is structured. One view is that it is divided into four groups, three of which – Atayalic, Tsouic and Paiwanic – are located exclusively on the island of Taiwan. Other proposals identify up to nine groups in Taiwan.

Just one branch, Malayo-Polynesian, accounts for the bulk of the languages of the family, and includes all Austronesian languages spoken outside Taiwan. Malayo-Polynesian is subdivided into four groups, Central Malayo-Polynesian, South Halmahera-West New Guinea, Oceanic (eastern group) and Western Malayo-Polynesian. Regardless of the actual structure of the family, it is clear that there is considerably greater diversity in the languages of Taiwan than in all of the rest of the languages. It is generally assumed that the region of greatest diversity is the most likely homeland, the region where the proto-language was spoken, since it is in this region that the languages have been longest that they have had the most opportunity to diversify. Taiwan is thus the most likely homeland for Austronesian.

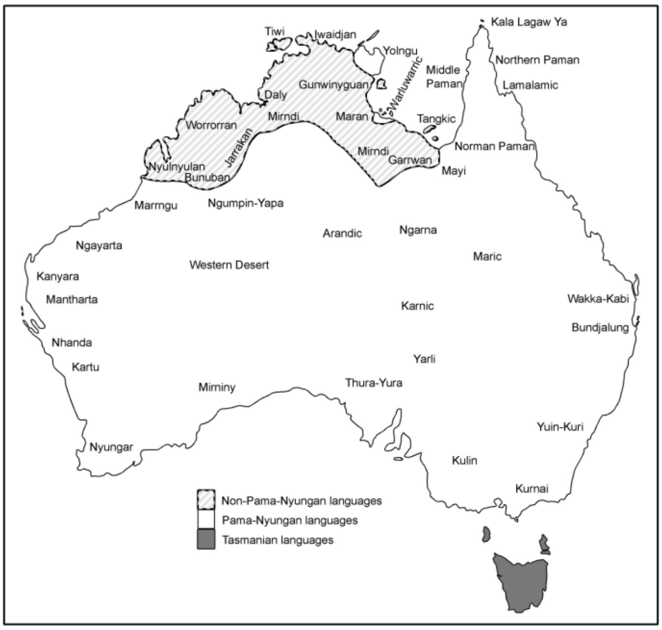
Evidence from archaeology is largely in agreement with linguistic evidence that Taiwan was the homeland of Austronesian, and that the languages began spreading from there some 5,500 or so years ago. The languages spread via migrations of people travelling over the sea, and taking farming with them. The island of New Guinea was reached about 2000 BCE, Polynesia around 1200 BCE, Hawai'i and Easter Islands around 500 CE, and New Zealand about 1250–1300 CE.

It has recently been proposed that the Austronesian languages are genetically related to the Sino-Tibetan languages (see pp. 000–000), forming a large Sino-Tibetan–Austronesian family. Laurent Sagart (2005) makes a plausible – though not widely accepted – case for this macro-group, identifying some 60 cognates in basic vocabulary among Austronesian and Sino-Tibetan languages, as well as recurrent sound correspondences. He avers that there is archaeological evidence in agreement with his proposals, and that the initial spread of the proto-language for this family was from mainland China to Taiwan, accompanying a migration of agriculturalists driven by population expansion. The archaeologist Peter Bellwood (2005) is in basic agreement, though he places the original mainland China homeland in a different location.

Australia

At least 260 distinct and mutually unintelligible languages were spoken in Australia prior to European colonization. (The number would be closer to 500 if we define languages by political criteria.) A number have since passed out of everyday usage as primary codes of communication; almost all are currently endangered, and only a few are being passed on to children as their mother tongues.

As already mentioned, it is not known for certain whether or not the languages are ultimately genetically related (and a few linguists believe that we will never know). The current consensus is that the languages belong to some twenty or so families, one of which, Pama-Nyungan, is spread over three-quarters of the continent. The other quarter of the continent is home of the remaining families, which are conventionally grouped together as non-Pama-Nyungan – there is no implication that this is a genetic family. (The status of Pama-Nyungan as a genetic family is also disputed by a few Australianists. Most Australianists, however, believe that ultimately it will be shown that they are related languages, by reconstruction of proto-Pama-Nyungan.) Map 5 shows the geographical division between Pama-Nyungan and non-Pama-Nyungan.



Map 5. Some languages of Australia, showing some non-Pama-Nyungan families and some Pama-Nyungan languages

Precious little is known about the now extinct languages of Tasmania, and insufficient information was recorded on them to permit any viable classification. The notion that they belong to an Indo-Pacific genetic family that includes most of the languages, other than Austronesian ones, spoken in this vast region, from the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal through New Guinea, Australia, and Tasmania (Greenberg 1971) has no empirical foundation. Nor is there even strong evidence that they are related to any languages of mainland Australia – or that they are not.

New Guinea and Melanesia

New Guinea and nearby islands is perhaps the most linguistically diverse region on earth, with around 1,200 languages spoken by some six to seven million people. About a quarter of the languages, mostly located on the smaller islands and on parts of the coast of the island of New Guinea, are Austronesian, and belong to the Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian subgroup. The remainder, which number over 800, are called Papuan, a term that includes all of the languages of the region other than Austronesian. (Like the term non-Pama-Nyungan, this is a negative characterization, and does not imply the languages form a genetic unit.)

Papuan languages fall into 30 or more distinct genetic families and about two dozen isolates. The average family consists of 25 languages, each with an average of less than 3,000 speakers. The largest language, Enga, has around 200,000 speakers; many languages have less than 100, even less than 50 speakers.

The largest Papuan family (or stock), Trans-New Guinea, consists, according to *Ethnologue*, of some 480 languages belonging to dozen groups and spoken mainly along the mountainous cordillera of New Guinea. Proto-Trans-New Guinea has not been reconstructed; indeed, there is considerable diversity of opinion as to the structure and composition of the putative family. The *Ethnologue* grouping is a 'lumping' one basically following Wurm (1975); more recently, Foley (2000) has suggested that it consists of around 300 languages, and Ross (2005) has proposed a version with 400 or so languages. Other Papuanists accept the core of the Trans-New Guinea grouping, with a good deal of uncertainty as to which languages and groups belong to it. Even in its most reduced form Trans-New Guinea fits into the category of large language family.

The Americas

The classification of the indigenous languages of America has been the subject of much controversy in recent years. On the lumping side, Joseph Greenberg has proposed (1987) three stocks or phyla, i.e. large groupings of genetic families: Eskimo-Aleut (widely accepted), Na-Dene (see below), and Amerind, containing all other languages of North America, Meso-America and all languages of South America. Amerind in particular is highly contentious, and is not supported by application of the comparative method; it is almost universally rejected by Americanists. On the splitting side, Lyle Campbell recognizes some 200 distinct families (1997), with no higher groupings into stocks.

North America

Some 300 distinct languages were spoken in what is now the USA and Canada before the advent of Europeans. A recent survey, Mithun (1999), recognizes 50 families; some of the main ones are shown in Map 6.

Map 6. Some major languages and language families of North America

In the far north is the Eskimo-Aleut family, which stretches from Eastern Siberia across the northern fringe of the continent, and then on to Greenland. The Aleut group is spoken on the Aleutian Islands in and near the Bering Strait. The Eskimo group is divided into Yup'ik, spoken in Siberia and Alaska, and Inuit, spoken in northern Alaska, Canada, and Greenland.

One of the largest families in north America is Athapaskan, spoken over a large area of Alaska and the northwest of Canada; Athapaskan languages are also found in two geographically separate regions, Pacific Coast Athapaskan in Oregon and California, and Apachean in southwestern USA. Navajo, one of the most vigorous of the traditional languages of north America, is an Athapaskan language. Athapaskan forms the core of Greenberg’s proposed Na-Dene family, which includes Tlingit and Haida as well, although these are uncertain genetic relatives.

Other major families are Algic (which includes Algonquian languages covering much of the northeast of the continent, and two languages in California), Iroquoian (spoken around the Great Lakes), Siouan (spoken in a large part of the plains region of the USA), and Uto-Aztecan (spoken in the Great Basin, in the western part of the USA, and extending into Meso-America). A number of small families, including Wakashan, Miwok-Costanoan, and Yuman are located along the Pacific Northwest, and a number of isolates are found mainly on the Pacific coast and south-east of the USA.

Meso-America

Aside from Uto-Aztecan, Meso-American languages belong to four main families: Otomanguan (a large family of around 170 languages spoken in Mexico), Mixe-Zoquean (a small family of 16 languages spoken in a number of geographically separated areas in Mexico), Mayan (about 70 languages spoken in Mexico, Belize and Guatemala), and Chibchan (some 22 languages spoken in Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras and Colombia).

South America

Around 1,000 traditional languages are or were spoken on the continent of South America, of which some 300 are spoken in the Amazon Basin. Since the beginning of European colonization many have disappeared, some without trace; it is presumed that many more will disappear in the next century. Brazil is home to some two hundred indigenous languages, of which more than half have less than 1,000 speakers, and only four have more than 10,000 speakers. The Indo-European languages English, Spanish, Portuguese, or French now dominate in all South American countries.

According to one classification, the traditional languages belong to some 118 genetic units, 48 of which are families of two or more languages, the remainder being language isolates. One widely distributed group is the Arawakan family, which is scattered over much of the northern part of the continent. It consists of some 60 languages, most of which belong to the Maipuran group. Some other large families are: Tupi-Guaraní, consisting of some 70 languages in the southern Amazonian region, including Paraguayan Guaraní, spoken by 95% of the population of the country, and one of its national languages; Macro-Gê, consisting of 32 languages spoken in the highlands of Brazil; Carib, consisting of some 30 languages from northern Brazil, Venezuela and the Guianas; Tucanoan, made up of some 26 languages centred in western Amazonia; and Quechuan, a family of some 47 languages widely spoken in the Andean region, and the largest family of indigenous languages in the Americas in terms of numbers of speakers (over ten million). Smaller families include: Tacanan, a group of 6 languages spoken in Bolivia; Chon, consisting of two languages spoken in Argentina and Patagonia; Aymaran, consisting of three language spoken by some two million people in Bolivia and Peru; and Jivaroan, a family of four languages spoken in Peru and Ecuador.

Guide to further reading

A good overview of the linguistic diversity of the world is Comrie (2017), which provides basic information on many language families. There are a number of more comprehensive book-length treatments of the world's linguistic diversity. My recommendation is Pereltsvaig (2012), which provides much intriguing information on a range of languages and their speakers. Anderson (2012) is an accessible overview. Garry and Rubino (2001) contains basic information on 191 languages from all over the world, including the viability of the language, use in education, genetic classification and basic grammar. Each description is by a linguist with some knowledge of the language, and it is a very useful resource. An older, but still useful survey, is Lyovin (1997), which gives grammatical information on a selection of languages. Ruhlen (1987, revised version 1991), is a highly speculative classification of the world's languages, and few of the proposed groupings are accepted by experts.

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