



# THE GEOGRAPHY OF LANGUAGE

## Building the Spoken Word

**L**anguage is one of the primary features that distinguishes humans from other animals. Many animals, including dolphins, whales, and birds, do indeed communicate with one another through patterned systems of sounds, movements, or scents and other chemicals. Some nonhuman primates have been taught to use sign language to communicate with humans. In turn, we have attempted to translate animal noises into words in human languages, with results that vary across cultures (Figure 4.1). However, the complexity of human language, its ability to convey nuanced emotions and ideas, and its importance for our existence as social beings set it apart from the communication systems used by other animals. In many ways, language is the essence of culture. It provides the single most common variable by which different cultural groups are identified and by which groups assert their unique identity. Language

not only facilitates the cultural diffusion of innovations but it also helps to shape the way we think about, perceive, and name our environment.

**Language**, a mutually agreed-on system of symbolic communication, offers the main means by which learned belief systems, customs, and skills pass from one generation to the next.

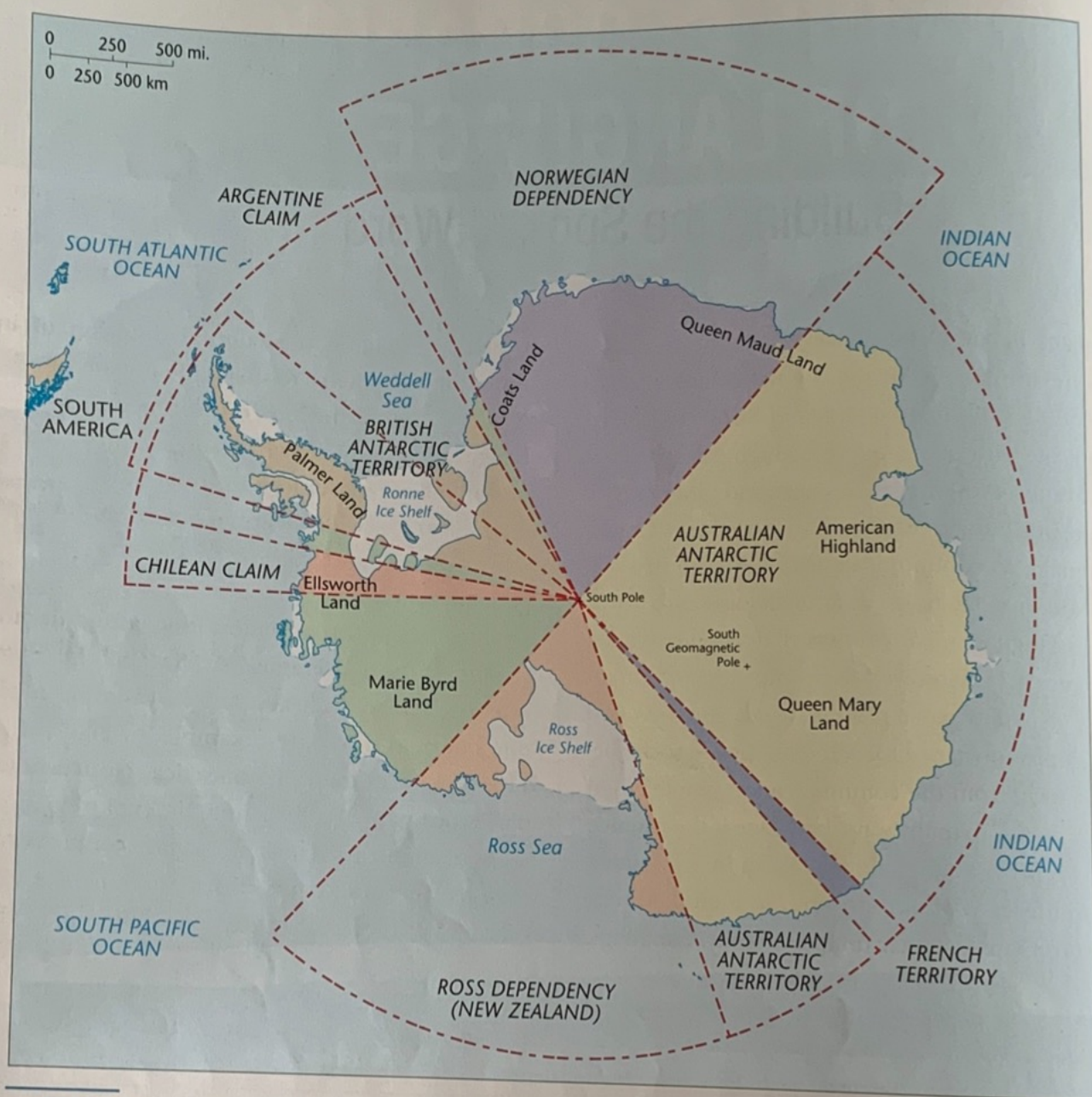
### language

A mutually agreed-on system of symbolic communication that has a spoken and usually a written expression.

One of our first and most long-lasting ties to place is forged through language. The ability to name, or rename, a place is a key step in claiming a place as one's own, as shown, for example, by Figure 4.2, page 116, a political map of Antarctica. Notice how many places are named after Antarctic explorers and monarchs of countries that claim portions of the continent: the Ross Sea and Ross Ice Shelf are named after James Clark Ross, the English explorer who charted much

|         | English           | Indonesian | Japanese | Greek       |
|---------|-------------------|------------|----------|-------------|
| Dog     | bow-wow           | gonggong   | wanwan   | gav         |
| Cat     | meow              | ngeong     | nyaa     | niaou       |
| Bird    | tweet-tweet       | kicau      | chunchun | tsiou tsiou |
| Rooster | cock-a-doodle-doo | kikeriku   | kokekoko | ki-kiriki   |

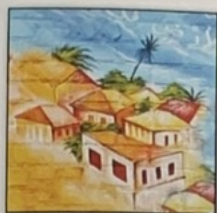
**FIGURE 4.1 Translating animal sounds.** Although a cat obviously sounds the same in any part of the world, the speakers of different human languages render that sound in diverse ways. This chart shows how the sounds of various animals “translate” into different human languages. (Compiled using information from a project by Dr. Catherine N. Ball in Georgetown University’s Department of Linguistics, titled “Sounds of the World’s Animals.”)



**FIGURE 4.2 Naming place is closely related to claiming place.** This map shows the pie-shaped land claims of various nations. Notice how place-names reflect the names of Antarctic explorers or political rulers on the political map of this continent. (Adapted from Latimer Clarke Corporation Pty Ltd.)

of Antarctica's coastline, and Queen Maud Land is named after Norway's Queen Maud. Interestingly, Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer who gave Queen Maud Land its name in 1939, took part in an earlier trip that highlights the importance of language. In 1898, Amundsen was part of an ill-fated expedition to locate the magnetic south pole when his ship be-

came stuck in the ice for more than one year. Several of Amundsen's shipmates, including men from Poland, Romania, Norway, the United States, and Belgium, went insane. This was not only because of the long winter nights and the cold weather; in great part, language differences among the men became their biggest problem. They simply could not understand one another!



## Region

*What is the geographical patterning of languages? Do various languages provide the basis for formal and functional culture regions?*

The spatial variation of speech is remarkably complicated, adding intricate patterns to the human mosaic (Figure 4.3, pages 118–119). Because language is such a central component of culture, understanding the spatiality of language, and how and why its patterns change over time, provides a particularly valuable window into cultural geography more generally. The logical place to begin our geographical study of language is with the regional theme.

Separate languages are those that cannot be mutually understood. In other words, a monolingual speaker of one

### dialect

A distinctive local or regional variant of a language that remains mutually intelligible to speakers of other dialects of that language; a subtype of a language.

language cannot comprehend the speaker of another. **Dialects**, by contrast, are variant forms of a language where mutual comprehension is possible. A speaker of English, for example, can generally understand that language's various dialects, regard-

less of whether the speaker comes from Australia, Scotland, or Mississippi. Nevertheless, a dialect is distinctive enough in vocabulary and pronunciation to label its speaker as hailing from one place or another, or even from a particular city. About 6000 languages and many more dialects are spoken in the world today.

When different linguistic groups come into contact, a **pidgin** language, characterized by a very small vocabulary

### pidgin

A composite language consisting of a small vocabulary borrowed from the linguistic groups involved in commerce.

derived from the languages of the groups in contact, often results. Pidgins primarily serve the purposes of trade and commerce: they facilitate exchange at a basic level but do not have complex vocabu-

laries or grammatical structures. An example is Tok Pisin, meaning "talk business." Tok Pisin is a largely English-derived pidgin spoken in Papua New Guinea, where it has become the official national language in a country where many native Papuan tongues are spoken. Although New Guinea pidgin is not readily intelligible to a speaker of Standard English, certain common words such as *gut bai*

("good-bye"), *tenkyu* ("thank you"), and *haumas* ("how much") reflect the influence of English. When pidgin languages acquire fuller vocabularies and become native languages of their speakers, they are called

### creole

A language derived from a pidgin language that has acquired a fuller vocabulary and become the native language of its speakers.

**creole** languages. Obviously, deciding precisely when a pid-

gin becomes a creole language has at least as much to do with a group's political and social recognition as it does with what are, in practice, fuzzy boundaries between language forms.

Another response to the need for speakers of different languages to communicate with one another is the elevation of one existing language to the status of a **lingua franca**.

A lingua franca is a language of communication and commerce spoken across a wide area where it is not a mother tongue. The Swahili language enjoys lingua franca status in much of East Africa, where inhabitants speak a number of other regional languages and dialects. English is fast becoming a global lingua

franca. Finally, regions that have linguistically mixed populations may be characterized by **bilingualism**, which is the ability to speak two languages with fluency. For example, along the U.S.-Mexico border, so many residents speak both English and Spanish (with varying degrees of fluidity) that bilingualism in practice—even if not in policy—means there is no need for a lingua franca.

### lingua franca

An existing, well-established language of communication and commerce used widely where it is not a mother tongue.

### bilingualism

The ability to speak two languages fluently.

## Language Families

One way in which geolinguists often simplify the mapping of languages is by grouping them into **language families**: tongues that are

### language family

A group of related languages derived from a common ancestor.

related and share a common ancestor. Words are simply arbitrary sounds associated with certain meanings. Thus, when words in different languages are alike in both sound and meaning, they may well be related. Over time, languages interact with one another, borrowing words, imposing themselves through conquest, or organically diverging from a common ground. Languages and their interrelations can thus be graphically depicted as a tree with various branches (Figure 4.4, page 120). This classification makes the complicated linguistic mosaic a bit easier to comprehend.

**Indo-European Language Family** The largest and most widespread language family is the Indo-European, which is spoken on all the continents and is dominant in Europe, Russia, North and South America, Australia, and parts of southwestern Asia and India (see Figure 4.3). Romance, Slavic, Germanic, Indic, Celtic, and Iranian are all Indo-European subfamilies. These subfamilies are in turn divided into individual languages. For example, English is a Germanic Indo-European language. Seven Indo-European

## Languages

### Indo-European Family

- Slavic
- Germanic
- Romance
- Indic
- Other Indo-European

### Sino-Tibetan Family

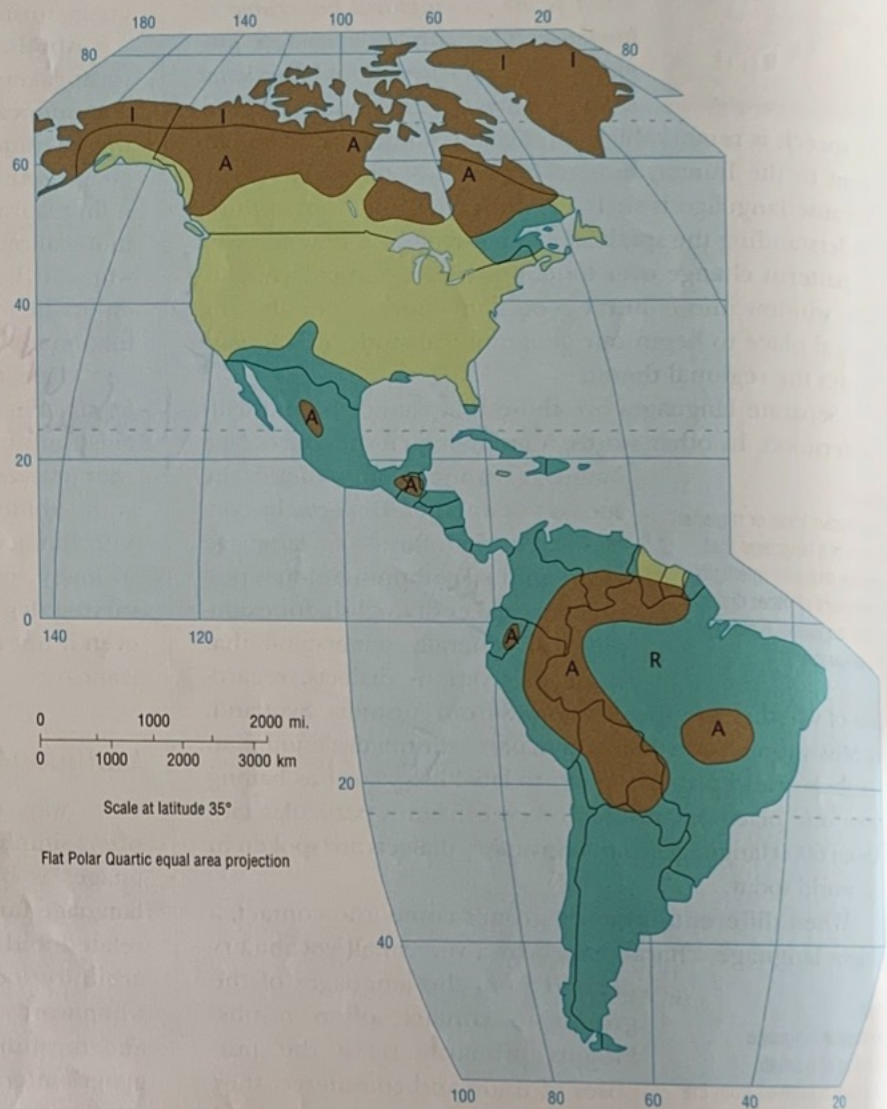
- Chinese
- Tibeto-Burman

### Afro-Asiatic Family

- Semitic
- Hamitic

### Other Language Families

- Altaic family
- Niger-Congo family
- Austronesian family
- Uralic family
- Austro-Asiatic family
- Japanese and Korean
- Other families



**FIGURE 4.3** The major linguistic formal culture regions of the world. Although there are thousands of languages and dialects in the world, they can be grouped into a few linguistic families. The Indo-European language family represents about half of the world's population. It was spread throughout the world in part through Europe's empire-building efforts.

tongues, including English, are among the 10 most spoken languages in the world as classified by the number of native speakers (Table 4.1, page 121).

Comparing the vocabularies of various Indo-European tongues reveals their kinship. For example, the English word *mother* is similar to the Polish *matka*, the Greek *meter*,

the Spanish *madre*, the Farsi *madar* in Iran, and the Sinhalese *mava* in Sri Lanka. Such similarities demonstrate that these languages have a common ancestral tongue.

**Sino-Tibetan Family** Sino-Tibetan is another of the major language families of the world and is second only to Indo-



I = Inuktitut

A = Amerindian (several language families)

C = Caucasian

N-S = Nilo-Saharan

K = Khoisan

Ps = Paleosiberian

D = Dravidian

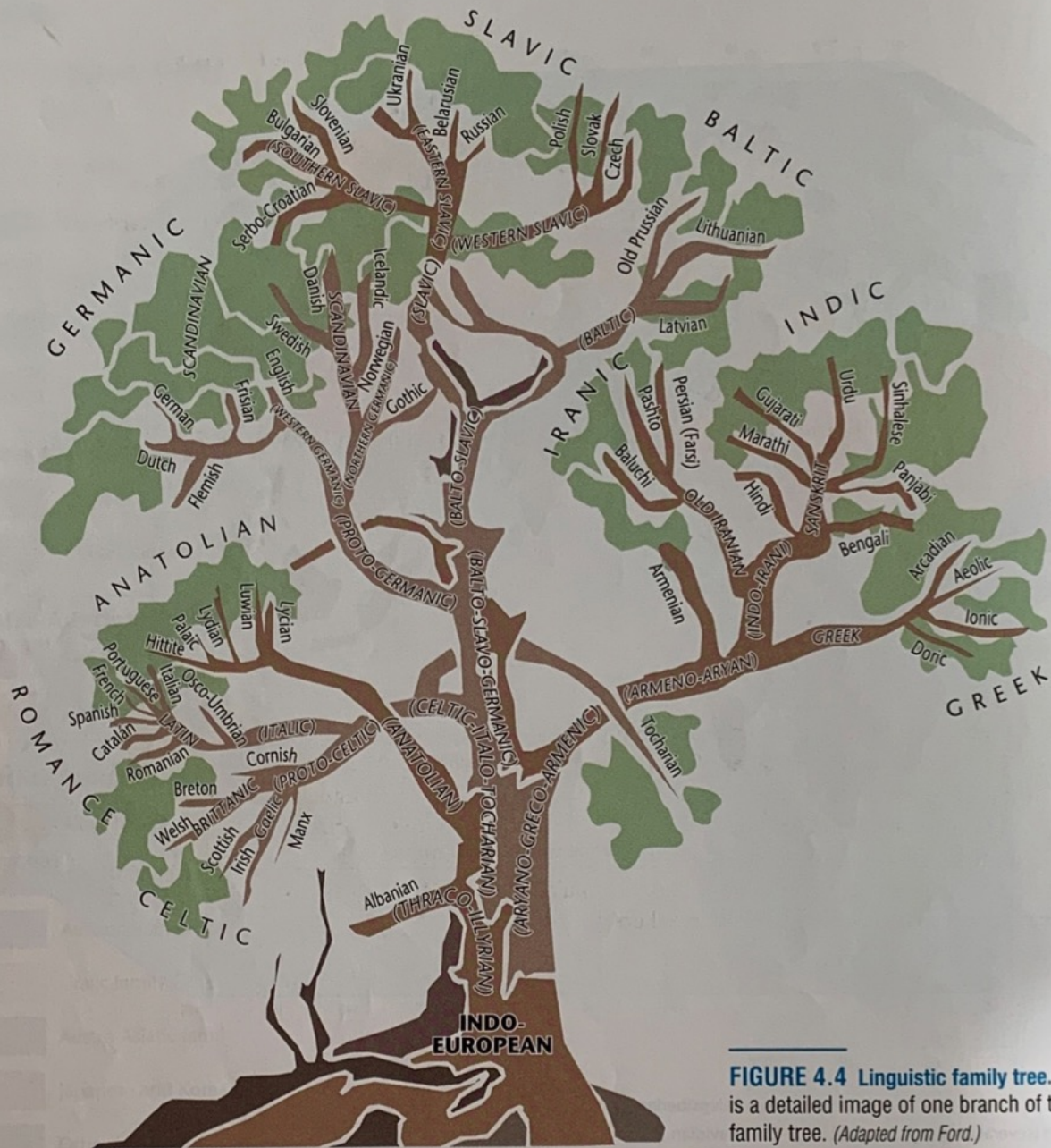
P = Papuan

Ab = Aborigine

R = Romance

European in numbers of native speakers. The Sino-Tibetan region extends throughout most of China and Southeast Asia (see Figure 4.3). The two language branches that make up this group, Sino- and Tibeto-Burman, are believed to have had a common origin some 6000 years ago in the Himalayan Plateau; speakers of the two language groups

subsequently moved along the great Asian rivers that originate in this area. "Sino" refers to China and in this context indicates the various languages spoken by more than 1.3 billion people in China. Han Chinese (Mandarin) is spoken in a variety of dialects and serves as the official language of China. The nearly 400 languages and dialects



**FIGURE 4.4** Linguistic family tree. Shown here is a detailed image of one branch of the linguistic family tree. (Adapted from Ford.)

that make up the Burmese and Tibetan branch of this language family border the Chinese language region on the south and west. Other East Asian languages, such as Vietnamese, have been heavily influenced by contact with the Chinese and their languages, although it is not clear that they are linguistically related to Chinese at all.

**Afro-Asiatic Family** The third major language family is the Afro-Asiatic. It consists of two major divisions: Semitic and Hamitic. The Semitic languages cover the area from the Arabian Peninsula and the Tigris-Euphrates river valley of Iraq westward through Syria and North Africa to

the Atlantic Ocean. Despite the considerable size of this region, there are fewer speakers of the Semitic languages than you might expect because most of the areas that Semites inhabit are sparsely populated deserts. Arabic is by far the most widespread Semitic language and has the greatest number of native speakers, about 235 million. Although many different dialects of Arabic are spoken, there is only one written form.

Hebrew, which is closely related to Arabic, is another Semitic tongue. For many centuries, Hebrew was a “dead” language, used only in religious ceremonies by millions of Jews throughout the world. With the creation of the state of

**TABLE 4.1 The 10 Leading Languages in Numbers of Native Speakers\***

| Language               | Family              | Speakers<br>(in millions) | Main Areas Where Spoken                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Han Chinese (Mandarin) | Sino-Tibetan        | 885                       | China, Taiwan, Singapore                                                                                                                        |
| Hindi/Urdu             | Indo-European       | 426                       | Northern India, Pakistan                                                                                                                        |
| Spanish                | Indo-European       | 358                       | Spain, Latin America, southwestern United States                                                                                                |
| English                | Indo-European       | 343                       | British Isles, United States, Caribbean, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Philippines, former British colonies in tropical Asia and Africa |
| Arabic                 | Afro-Asiatic        | 235                       | Middle East, North Africa                                                                                                                       |
| Bengali                | Indo-European       | 207                       | Bangladesh, eastern India                                                                                                                       |
| Portuguese             | Indo-European       | 176                       | Portugal, Brazil, southern Africa                                                                                                               |
| Russian                | Indo-European       | 167                       | Russia, Kazakhstan, parts of Ukraine and other former Soviet republics                                                                          |
| Japanese               | Japanese and Korean | 125                       | Japan                                                                                                                                           |
| German                 | Indo-European       | 100                       | Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Luxembourg, eastern France, northern Italy                                                                       |

\*"Native speakers" means mother tongue.

(Sources: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2000; World Almanac Books, 2001.)

Israel in 1948, a common language was needed to unite the immigrant Jews, who spoke the languages of their many different countries of origin. Hebrew was revived as the official national language of what otherwise would have been a **polyglot**, or multi-language, state (Figure 4.5). Amharic, a third major Semitic tongue, today claims 18 million speakers in the mountains of East Africa.

**polyglot**  
A mixture of different languages.

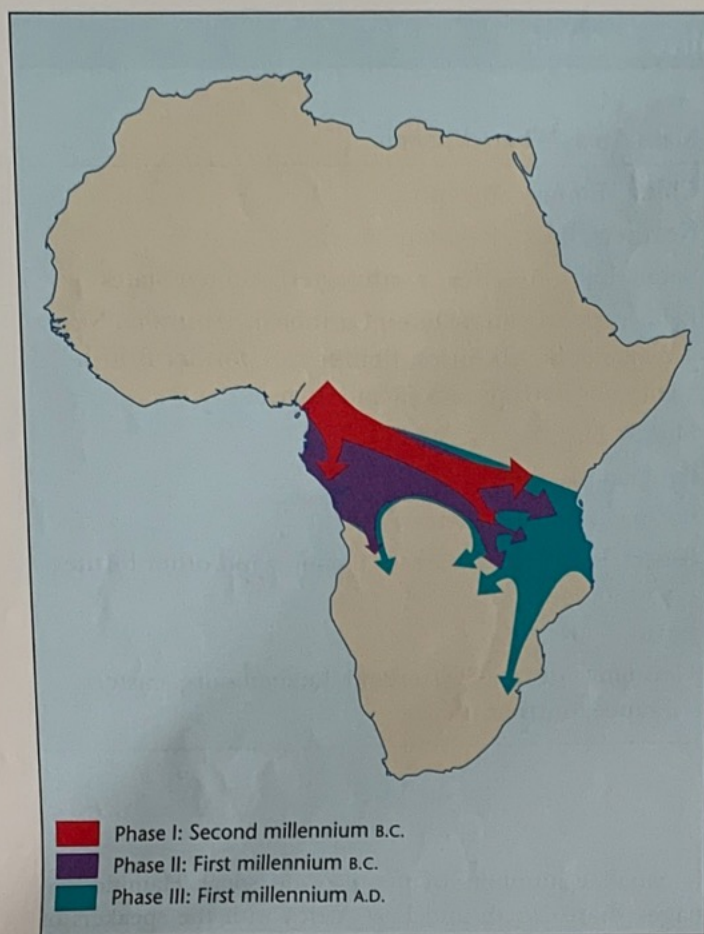
Smaller numbers of people who speak Hamitic languages share North and East Africa with the speakers of Semitic languages. Like the Semitic languages, these tongues originated in Asia but today are spoken almost exclusively in Africa by the Berbers of Morocco and Algeria, the Tuaregs of the Sahara, and the Cushites of East Africa.

**Other Major Language Families** Most of the rest of the world's population speak languages belonging to one of six remaining major families. The Niger-Congo language family, also called Niger-Kordofanian, which is spoken by about 325 million people, dominates Africa south of the Sahara Desert. The greater part of the Niger-Congo culture region belongs to the Bantu subgroup. Both Niger-Congo and its Bantu constituent are fragmented into a great many different languages and dialects, including Swahili. The Bantu and their many related languages spread from what is now southeastern Nigeria about 4000 years ago, first west and then south in response to climate change and new agricultural techniques (Figure 4.6, page 122).

Flanking the Slavic Indo-Europeans on the north and south in Asia are the speakers of the Altaic language family, including Turkic, Mongolic, and several other subgroups. The Altaic homeland lies largely in the inhospitable deserts, tundra, and coniferous forests of northern and central Asia. Also occupying tundra and grassland areas adjacent to the Slavs is the Uralic family. Finnish and



**FIGURE 4.5 Sign in Arab Quarter of Nazareth.** Many of Israel's cities are home to diverse populations. This sign at a child-care center reflects Israel's polyglot population, with its English, Arabic, and Hebrew wording. (Courtesy of Patricia L. Price.)



**FIGURE 4.6 Bantu expansionism.** The Bantu and their many languages spread from what is today southeastern Nigeria to the west and south. (Adapted from Dingemans/Wikipedia.)

Hungarian are the two more widely spoken Uralic tongues, and both enjoy the status of official languages in their respective countries.

One of the most remarkable language families in terms of distribution is the Austronesian. Representatives of this group live mainly on tropical islands stretching from Madagascar, off the east coast of Africa, through Indonesia and the Pacific islands, to Hawaii and Easter Island. This longitudinal span is more than half the distance around the world. The north-south, or latitudinal, range of this language area is bounded by Hawaii and Taiwan in the north and New Zealand in the south. The largest single language in this family is Malay-Indonesian, with 58 million native speakers, but the most widespread is Polynesian.

Japanese and Korean, with about 200 million speakers combined, probably form another Asian language family. The two perhaps have some link to the Altaic family, but even their kinship to each other remains controversial and unproven.

In Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese, Cambodians, Thais, and some tribal peoples of Malaya and parts of India speak

languages that constitute the Austro-Asiatic family. They occupy an area into which Sino-Tibetan, Indo-European, and Austronesian languages have all encroached.



## Mobility

*How did the mosaic of languages and dialects come to exist? How is the spatial patterning of language changing today?*

Different types of cultural diffusion have helped shape the linguistic map. Relocation diffusion has been extremely important because languages spread when groups, in whole or in part, migrate from one area to another. Some individual tongues or entire language families are no longer spoken in the regions where they originated, and in certain other cases the linguistic hearth is peripheral to the present distribution (compare Figures 4.3, pages 118–119, and 4.7). Today, languages continue to evolve and change based on the shifting locations of peoples and on their needs as well as on outside forces.

## Indo-European Diffusion

According to a widely accepted new theory, the earliest speakers of the Indo-European languages lived in southern and southeastern Turkey, a region known as Anatolia, about 9000 years ago (Figure 4.7). According to the so-called **Anatolian hypothesis**, the initial diffusion of these Indo-European speakers was facilitated by the innovation of plant domestication. As sedentary farming became adopted throughout Europe, a gradual and peaceful expansion diffusion of Indo-European languages occurred. As these people dispersed and lost contact with one another, different Indo-European groups gradually developed variant forms of the language, causing fragmentation of the language family. The Anatolian hypothesis has been criticized by scholars who note that specific terms related to animals (particularly horses), as opposed to agriculture, link Indo-European languages to a common origin. The so-called **Kurgan hypothesis** places the rise of Indo-European languages in the central Asian steppes only 6000 years ago, positing that the spread of Indo-European languages was both swifter and less peaceful than is maintained by those who subscribe to the Anatolian hypothesis. No one theory has been definitively proven to be correct.

### Anatolian hypothesis

A theory of language diffusion holding that the movement of Indo-European languages from the area in contemporary Turkey known as Anatolia followed the spread of plant domestication technologies.

### Kurgan hypothesis

A theory of language diffusion holding that the spread of Indo-European languages originated with animal domestication in the central Asian steppes and grew more aggressively and swiftly than proponents of the Anatolian hypothesis maintain.



**FIGURE 4.7 Origin and diffusion of four major language families in the Eastern Hemisphere.** The early diffusion of Indo-European speech to the west and north probably occurred in conjunction with the diffusion of agriculture from the Middle Eastern center, as did the early spread of the Afro-Asiatic family. All such origins, lost in time, are speculative. As these and other groups advanced, certain linguistic families retreated to refuges in remote places, where they hold out to the present day. Sources, dates, and routes are mostly speculative. (Sources: Krantz, 1988; Renfrew, 1989.)

What is more certain is that in later millennia, the diffusion of certain Indo-European languages—in particular Latin, English, and Russian—occurred in conjunction with the territorial spread of great political empires. In such cases the diffusion of imperial conquest, relocation and expansion diffusion were not mutually exclusive. Relocation diffusion occurred as a small number of conquering elites came to rule an area.

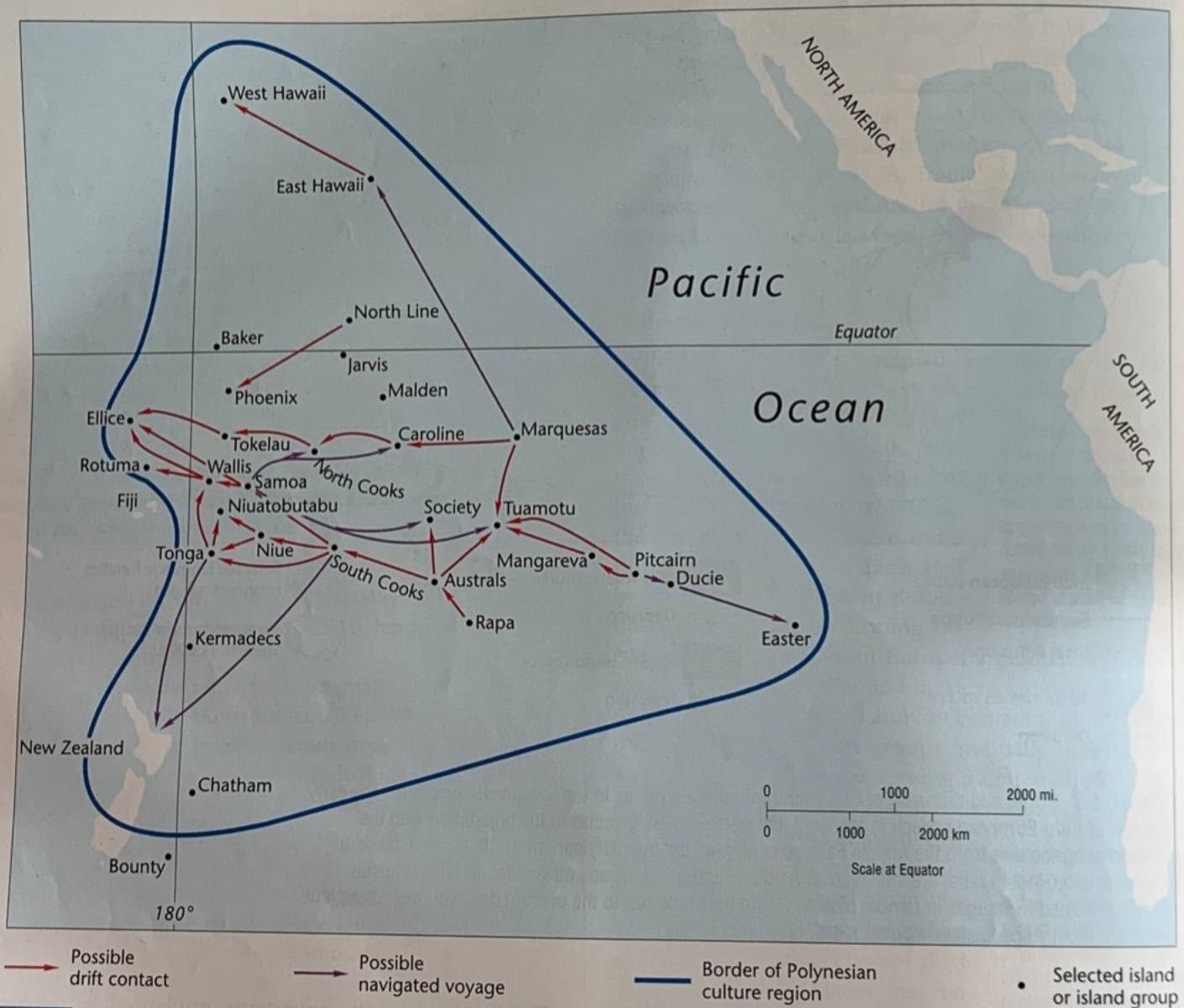
The language of the conqueror, implanted by relocation diffusion, often gained wider acceptance through expansion diffusion. Typically, the conqueror's language spread hierarchically—adopted first by the more important and influential persons and by city dwellers. The diffusion of Latin with Roman conquests, and Spanish with the conquest of Latin America, occurred in this manner.

## Austronesian Diffusion

One of the most impressive examples of linguistic diffusion is that of the Austronesian languages, 5000 years ago, from a presumed hearth in the interior of Southeast Asia that was completely outside the present Austronesian culture region. From here, it is theorized, speakers of this language family first spread southward into the Malay Peninsula (see Figure 4.7, page 123). Then, in a process lasting perhaps several thousand years and requiring remarkable navigational skills, they migrated through the islands of

Indonesia and sailed in tiny boats across vast, uncharted expanses of ocean to New Zealand, Easter Island, Hawaii, and Madagascar. If agriculture was the technology permitting Indo-European diffusion, sailing and navigation provided the key to the spread of the Austronesians.

Most remarkable of all was the diffusionary achievement of the Polynesian people, who form the eastern part of the Austronesian culture region. Polynesians occupy a triangular realm consisting of hundreds of Pacific islands, with New Zealand, Easter Island, and Hawaii at the three corners (Figure 4.8). The Polynesians' watery leap of



**FIGURE 4.8** Probabilities of selected Polynesian drift and navigation voyages in the Pacific Ocean. According to a computer model, the outer arc of Polynesia, represented by Hawaii, Easter Island, and New Zealand, could have been reached only by navigated voyages. The earliest known Polynesian pottery shards were found in Tonga by archaeologists David Burley and William Dickinson, suggesting that the first distinctively Polynesian culture originated there. (Adapted from Levison, Ward, and Webb, 1973: 5, 33, 35, 43, 61.)

2500 miles (4000 kilometers) from the South Pacific to Hawaii, a migration in outrigger canoes against prevailing winds into a new hemisphere with different navigational stars, must rank as one of the greatest achievements in seafaring. No humans had previously found the isolated Hawaiian Islands, and the Polynesian sailors had no way of knowing ahead of time that land existed in that quarter of the Pacific.

The relocation diffusion that produced the remarkable present distribution of the Polynesian languages has long been the subject of controversy. How, and by what means, could a traditional people have achieved the diffusion? Geolinguists Michael Levison, Gerard Ward, and John Webb answered these questions by developing a computer model incorporating data on winds, ocean currents, vessel traits and capabilities, island visibility, and duration of voyage. Both *drift* voyages, in which the boat simply floats with the winds and currents, and *navigated* voyages were considered.

After performing more than 100,000 voyage simulations, they concluded that the Polynesian triangle had probably been entered from the west, from the direction of the ancient Austronesian hearth area, in a process of “island hopping”—that is, migrating from one island to another one visible in the distance. The core of eastern Polynesia was probably reached in navigated voyages, but once this was attained, drift voyages easily explain much of the internal diffusion. According to Levison and his colleagues, a peripheral region, the “outer arc from Hawaii through Easter Island to New Zealand,” could be reached only by means of intentionally navigated voyages: truly astonishing and daring feats (see Figure 4.8).

In carrying out their investigation, Levison and his colleagues employed the themes of region (present distribution of Polynesians) and nature-culture (currents, winds, visibility of islands) to help describe and explain the workings of a third theme, mobility.

## Religion and Linguistic Mobility

Cultural interaction creates situations in which language is linked to a particular religious faith or denomination, a linkage that greatly heightens cultural identity. Perhaps Arabic provides the best example of this cultural link. It spread from a core area on the Arabian Peninsula with the expansion of Islam. Had it not been for the evangelical success of the Muslims, Arabic would not have diffused so widely. The other Semitic languages also correspond to particular religious groups. Hebrew-speaking people are of the Jewish faith, and the Amharic speakers in Ethiopia tend to be Coptic, or Eastern, Christians. Indeed, we can attribute the preservation and recent revival of Hebrew to

its active promotion by Jewish nationalists who believe that teaching and promoting Hebrew to diasporic Jews facilitates unity.

Certain languages have even acquired a religious status. Latin survived mainly as the ceremonial language of the Roman Catholic Church and Vatican City. In non-Arabic Muslim lands, such as Iran, where people consider themselves Persians and speak Farsi, Arabic is still used in religious ceremonies. Great religious books can also shape languages by providing them with a standard form. Martin Luther's translation of the Bible led to the standardization of the German language, and the Qur'an is the model for written Arabic. Because they act as common points of frequent cultural reference and interaction, great religious books can also aid in the survival of languages that would otherwise become extinct. The early appearance of a hymnal and the Bible in the Welsh language aided the survival of that Celtic tongue, and Christian missionaries in diverse countries have translated the Bible into local languages, helping to preserve them. In Fiji, the appearance of the Bible in one of the 15 local dialects elevated it to the dominant native language of the islands.

## Language's Shifting Boundaries

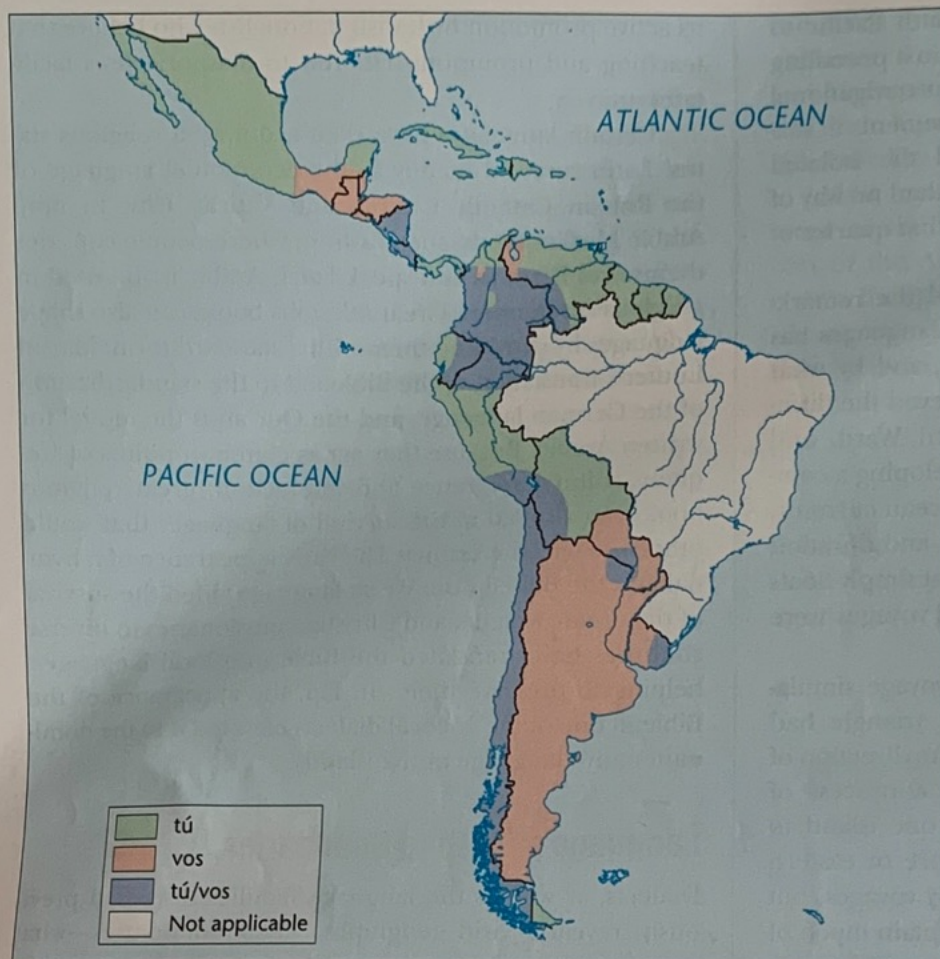
Dialects, as well as the language families discussed previously, reveal a vivid geography. Their boundaries—what separates them from other dialects and languages—shift over time, both spatially and in terms of what elements they contain or discard.

Geolinguists map dialects by using **isoglosses**, which indicate the spatial

### isogloss

The border of usage of an individual word or pronunciation.

borders of individual words or pronunciations. The dialect boundaries between Latin American Spanish speakers using *tú* and those using *vos* are clearly defined in some areas, as shown on the map in Figure 4.9, page 126. The choice of *tú* or *vos* for the second-person singular carries with it a cultural indication. *Vos* represents a usage closer to the original Spanish but is considered by many in the Spanish-speaking world to be rather archaic and, in fact, has died out in Spain itself. In other regions, particularly throughout Argentina, *vos* has long been used by the media; often, it is considered to reflect the “standard” dialect and usage for the area in which it is used. Because certain words or dialects can fall out of fashion or simply become overwhelmed by an influx of new speakers, isogloss boundaries are rarely clear or stable over time. Indeed, in Central America, the media are increasingly using *vos*—long used in conversation in the region—thus elevating *vos* to a more official status covering a larger territory. Because of this, geolinguists often disagree about how many dialects are present in an area or exactly where isogloss borders should



**FIGURE 4.9** Dialect boundaries in Latin America. Spanish speakers in the Americas use either *vos* or *tú* as the second-person singular verb form. They represent dialects of Spanish; both are correct, linguistically speaking, but the *vos* form is older. Some regions use *vos* and *tú* interchangeably. (Adapted from Pountain, 2005.)

be drawn. The language map of any place is a constantly shifting kaleidoscope.

The dialects of American English provide another good example. At least three major dialects, corresponding to major culture regions, had developed in the eastern United States by the time of the American Revolution: the Northern, Midland, and Southern dialects (Figure 4.10). As the three subcultures expanded westward, their dialects spread and fragmented. Nevertheless, they retained much of their basic character, even beyond the Mississippi River. These culture regions have unusually stable boundaries. Even today, the “*r*-less” pronunciation of words such as *car* (“cah”) and *storm* (“stohm”), characteristic of the East Coast Midland regions, is readily discernible in the speech of its inhabitants.

Although we are sometimes led to believe that Americans are becoming more alike, as a national culture overwhelms regional ones, the current status of American English dialects suggests otherwise. Linguistic divergence is still under way, and dialects continue to mutate on a regional level, just as they always have. Local variations in grammar and pronunciation proliferate, confounding the

proponents of standardized speech and defying the homogenizing influence of the Internet, television, and other mass media.

Shifting language boundaries involve content as well as spatial reach, and this, too, changes over time. Today, for example, some of the unique vocabulary of American English dialects is becoming old-fashioned. For instance, the term *icebox*, which was literally a wooden box with a compartment for ice that was used to cool food, was used widely throughout the United States to refer to the precursor of the refrigerator. Although the modern electric refrigerator is ubiquitous in the United States today, some people, particularly those of older generations and in the South, still use the term *icebox*. Many young people, by contrast, no longer pause to say the entire word *refrigerator*, shortening it instead to *fridge*.

As illustrated by the birth of the new word *fridge*, slang terms are quite common in most languages, and American English is no exception. **Slang** refers to words and phrases that are not a part of a standard, recog-

#### slang

Words and phrases that are not part of a standard, recognized vocabulary for a given language but that are nonetheless used and understood by some of its speakers.



**FIGURE 4.10 Major dialects of North American English, with a few selected subdialects.** These dialects had developed by the time of the American Revolution and have remained remarkably stable over time. (After Carver, 1986; Kurath, 1949.)

nized vocabulary for a given language but are nonetheless used and understood by some or most of its speakers. Often, subcultures—for example, youth, drug dealers, and nightclub-goers—have their own slang that is used within that community but is not readily understood by nonmembers. Slang words tend to be used for a period of time and then discarded as newer terms replace them. For example, *cool* and *groovy* were used to refer to desirable, attractive, or fashionable things in the 1970s. Although many people today still recognize these words, a new generation of young people is much more likely to use a new set of words. Their children, in turn, will more than likely use yet another set of words. Slang illustrates another way in which American English changes over time.

Some African-Americans speak a distinctive form of English. African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) shares characteristics with the Southern dialect and also displays considerable African influence in pitch, rhythm, and tone. Some linguists understand AAVE as a creole language that grew out of a pidgin that developed on the early slave plantations and is today spoken by some African-Americans. Indeed, AAVE shares many characteristics with other English

creole languages worldwide. Today, it is considered a dialect, or variation, of Standard American English. It is also considered an **ethnolect**: a dialect spoken by an ethnic group, in this case, African-Americans. The popularity of AAVE's distinctive vocabulary and syntax among some white Americans, however, calls into question its ethnic exclusivity and serves to point out the instability of any language boundaries, including ethnic ones.

Some distinguishing characteristics of AAVE's speech patterns include the use of double negatives ("She don't like nothing"), omission of forms of the verb *to be* ("He my friend"), and nonconjugation of verbs ("She give him her paper yesterday"). There is some controversy over the place of Ebonics in the U.S. educational system. Does Ebonics constitute a distinctive language, rather than simply a dialect of English? Should it be taught—with its attendant grammar, structure, and literature—to American schoolchildren? Are those who speak Ebonics and Standard English technically bilingual?

In the United States today, many descendants of Spanish speakers have adapted their speech to include words

**ethnolect**  
A dialect spoken by a particular ethnic group.

## Patricia's Notebook

### Miami State of Mind



Patricia Price



**Little Havana commercial landscape.** The lingua franca of Miami's Little Havana neighborhood is Spanish. This is reflected in the names and descriptions of local businesses. English is seldom seen (or heard).

*(Courtesy of Patricia L. Price.)*

Anglo-Americans. And the United Nations has ranked Miami number one in the world in terms of the proportion of foreign-born residents (just over 50 percent).

Perhaps the biggest transition for a new arrival to Miami from another U.S. city, however, involves language. Spanish is the lingua franca of Miami. You can get by here just fine without speaking a word of English, though the reverse is not true: monolingual English speakers will struggle to understand and be understood in many areas of their daily lives. In other words, not speaking Spanish is an impediment here, whether in one's personal transactions or even in the ability to get a job, since many require applicants to understand and speak some Spanish.

I wonder whether Miami will remain this way or whether—as with other so-called immigrant gateways such as New York, San Francisco, and Chicago—immigrants will eventually acculturate, and the lingua franca of this town will transition yet again to English. I can already see this happening with my students, most of whose parents or grandparents are immigrants. Already their Spanish (or Portuguese, or Haitian Kreyol) is limited to what I call “kitchen” status. In other words, their vocabularies are limited, and they speak Spanish or other languages mostly with non-English-speaking relatives. Their children might not learn any language beyond English.

Posted by Patricia Price

Geographically speaking, Miami—located in the state of Florida—is undoubtedly a part of the United States of America. However, many aspects of life here make visitors and residents alike feel more like they are somewhere else. As novelist Joan Didion wrote, Miami is “a settlement of considerable interest, not exactly an American city as American cities have until recently been understood but a tropical capital: long on rumor, short on memory . . . referring not to New York or Boston or Los Angeles or Atlanta but to Caracas and Mexico, to Havana and to Bogotá and to Paris and Madrid.” The climate is subtropical, with the only real seasonal variation being between the rainy (summer) and dry (winter) months. Even after 15 years, I still miss autumn! Demographically, about 65 percent of residents are Latino, while the rest are roughly evenly split between African- and

and variants of words in both Spanish and English, in a dialect known as “Spanglish” (see *Seeing Geography*, page 144). Although acceptance of AAVE and Spanglish as legitimate language forms is hardly without conflict (see Patri-

cia's Notebook and Subject to Debate), they illustrate the fluidity of languages and how they are constantly evolving and changing as the needs and experiences of their users change.

## Subject to Debate

### Imposing English

English-only laws are nothing new in the United States. Its history as a nation of immigrants has led to a population that, at any one point in time, has spoken a variety of languages besides English. In its early days as a colony, one could hear German, Dutch, French, and a multitude of Native American languages spoken alongside English. This prompted both Benjamin Franklin and John Adams to propose enforcing English as the sole acceptable language, and Theodore Roosevelt once said, "The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin or preventing all possibility of its continuing as a nation at all would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities. We have but one flag. We must also learn one language, and that language is English."

Citing concerns that providing official documents and services in multiple languages would simply be too expensive, contemporary advocates of English-only legislation claim that mandating one language is one way to reduce the cost of government. Some proponents also believe that English-only laws encourage immigrants to assimilate by learning the official language of the United States. Opponents accuse the laws of being racist and suggest that supporters of English-only legislation are threatened by cultural diversity. Linguistic unity, they say, does not lead to political or cultural unity. Furthermore, providing official documents and services only in English in effect denies these services and information to those who do not understand English. Debates such as these bring up questions of the legal, social, and political status of minority groups and their languages, debates that exist in many countries besides the United States.

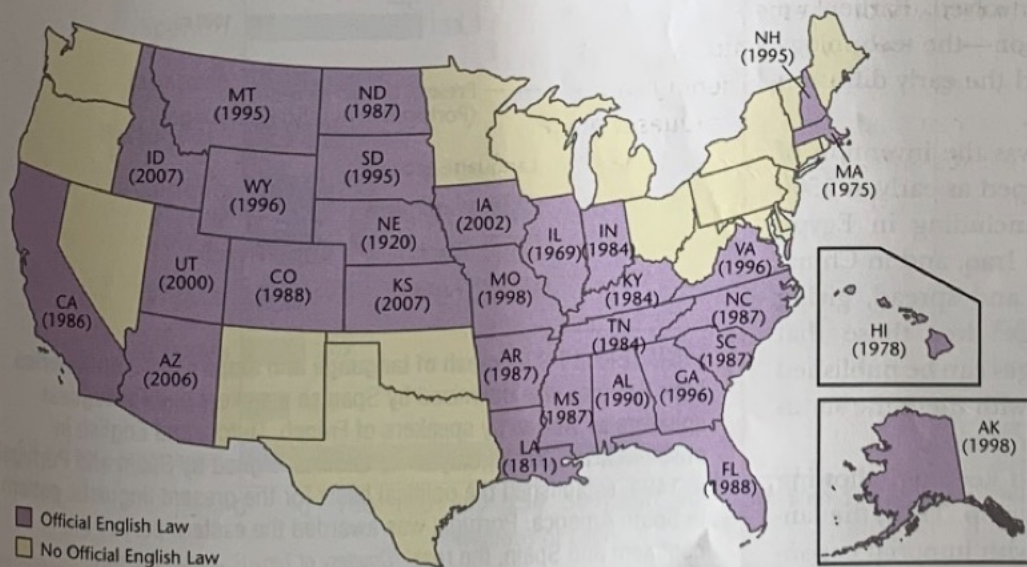
Today, most of those who wish to legislate English as the official language of the country target Spanish-speaking immigrants as the object of their concern. Language is often at the heart of the immigration debates that appear so often on the nightly news. Anxieties about being culturally "overwhelmed" by Spanish speakers who refuse to learn English culminate in claims that Latino immigrants are dividing the nation in two: one English speaking and culturally "American," and the other Spanish speaking and unable to assimilate into the mainstream (see Patricia's Notebook).

Historically, most immigrants to the United States sooner or later abandon their native tongues. As late as 1910, one out of every four Americans could speak some language other than English with the skill of a native (as compared to 14 percent in 1990). This was a result of the mass immigrations from Germany, Poland, Italy, Russia, China, and many other foreign lands. Much of this linguistic diversity has given way to English, partly because these other languages lacked legal status, partly because of the monolingual educational system in the United States, and partly because of social pressures.

### Continuing the Debate

As this discussion illustrates, many cultures do not want to assimilate into English-speaking society, choosing instead to actively assert pride in their language. Keeping this in mind, consider these questions:

- Do you think the wave of immigrants today, with their pride in language, is different from earlier waves? How so?
- Will monoglot English speakers become a dwindling minority as more and more people become bilingual through either choice or necessity?



**States that have some form of official English-only laws.** Dates show the years English-only laws were enacted. In the 1980s, the influx of immigrants to the United States from Asia and Latin America prompted many of these laws. Typically, English-only laws require that state documents be published in English only. Some states' laws, however, also prohibit the state from doing business in a language other than English or providing services such as multilingual emergency medical hotlines. (Source: Adapted from U.S. English, Inc.)



## Globalization

*What is the relationship between technology and language? How has the global reach of empires past and present affected the spatial distribution of language?*

*Why is the number of spoken languages on the decline worldwide?* More often than not, the diffusion of some languages has come at the expense of many others. Ten thousand years ago, the human race consisted of only 1 million people, speaking an estimated 15,000 languages. Today, a population 6000 times larger speaks only 40 percent as many tongues. Only 1 percent of all languages have as many as 500,000 speakers. Some experts believe that all but 300 languages will be extinct or dying by the year 2100. Clearly, cultural diffusion has worked to favor some languages and eliminate others. Each passing decade witnesses the extinction of more minor languages. Languages die out when their speakers do; often the entire cultural world associated with a language vanishes as well. Thus, globalization both presents the opportunity for more people to communicate directly with one another and, at the same time, threatens to extinguish the cultural diversity that goes hand-in-hand with linguistic diversity.

### Technology, Language, and Empire

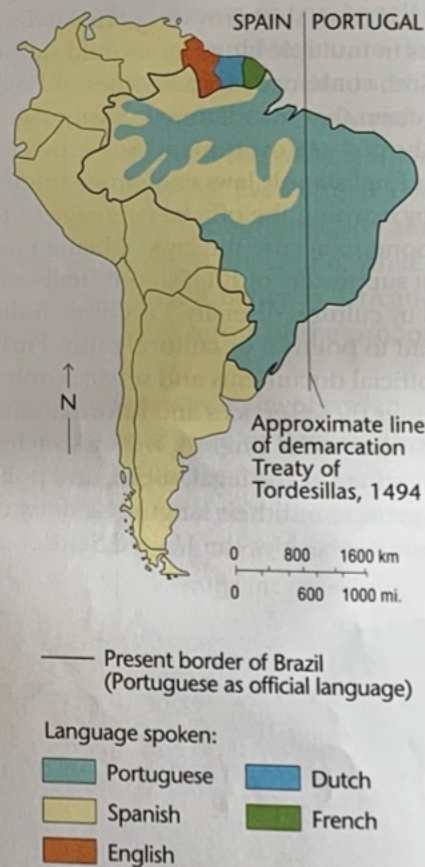
Technological innovations affecting language range from the basic practice of writing down spoken languages to the sophisticated information superhighway provided by the Internet. Technological innovations have in the past facilitated the spread and proliferation of multiple languages, but more recently they have encouraged the tendency of only a few languages—especially English—to dominate all others. Particular language groups achieve cultural dominance over neighboring groups in a variety of ways, often with profound results for the linguistic map of the world. Technological superiority is usually involved. Earlier, we saw how plant and animal domestication—the technology of the “agricultural revolution”—aided the early diffusion of the Indo-European language family.

An even more basic technology was the invention of writing, which appears to have developed as early as 5300 years ago in several hearth areas, including in Egypt, among the Sumerians in what is today Iraq, and in China. Writing helped civilizations develop and spread, giving written languages a major advantage over those that remained spoken only. Written languages can be published and distributed widely, and they carry with them the status of standard, official, and legal communication.

Written language facilitates record keeping, allowing governments and bureaucracies to develop. Thus, the languages of conquerors tend to spread with imperial expansion.

The imperial expansion of Britain, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, and the United States across the globe altered the linguistic practices of millions of people (Figure 4.11). This empire building superimposed Indo-European tongues on the map of the tropics and subtropics. The areas most affected were Asia, Africa, and the Austronesian island world. A parallel case from the ancient world is China, also a formidable imperial power that spread its language to those it conquered. During the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907), Chinese control extended to Tibet, Mongolia, Manchuria (in contemporary northeastern China), and Korea. The 4000-year-old written Chinese language proved essential for the cohesion and maintenance of its far-flung empire. Although people throughout the empire spoke different dialects or even different languages, a common writing system lent a measure of mutual intelligibility at the level of the written word.

Even though imperial nations have, for the most part, given up their colonial empires, the languages they trans-



**FIGURE 4.11 The mesh of language and empire in South America.** Latin America was colonized by Spanish speakers and Portuguese speakers as well as by speakers of French, Dutch, and English in northern areas. The Treaty of Tordesillas, signed by Spain and Portugal in 1494, established the political basis for the present linguistic pattern in South America. Portugal was awarded the eastern part of the continent and Spain, the rest. (Courtesy of Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov.)

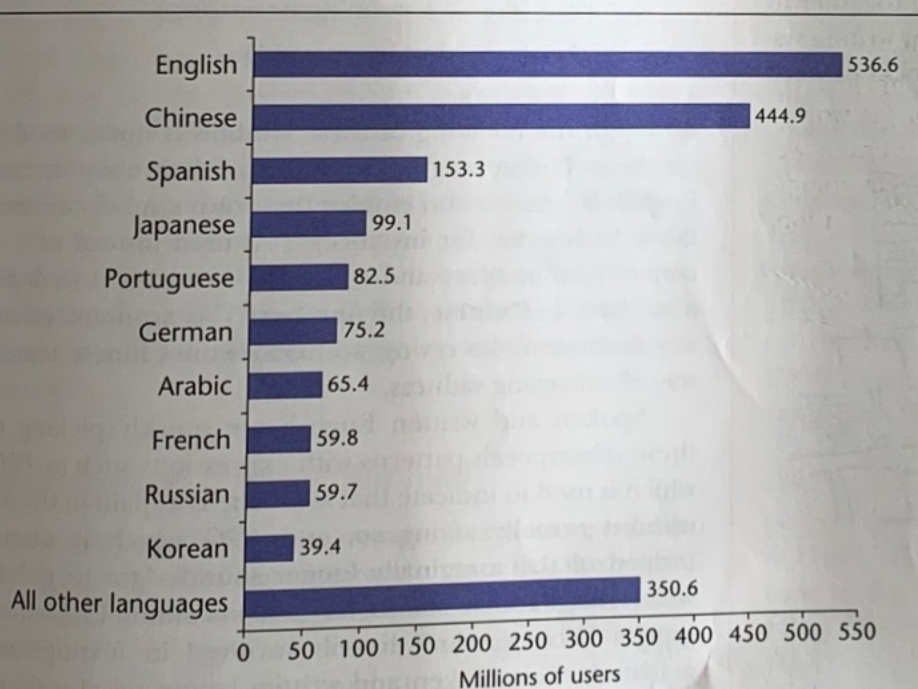


**FIGURE 4.12** French, the colonial language of the empire, shares this sign on the isle of Bora Bora in French Polynesia with the native variant of the Polynesian tongue. Until recently, French rulers allowed no public display of the Polynesian language and tried to make the natives adopt French. (Courtesy of Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov.)

planted overseas survive. As a result, English still has a foothold in much of Africa, South Asia, the Philippines, and the Pacific islands. French persists in former French and Belgian colonies, especially in northern, western, and central Africa; Madagascar; and Polynesia (Figure 4.12). In most of these areas, English and French function as the languages of the educated elite, often holding official legal status. They are also used as a lingua franca of government, commerce, and higher education, helping hold together states with multiple native languages.

Transportation technology also profoundly affects the geography of languages. Ships, railroads, and highways all serve to spread the languages of the culture groups that build them, sometimes spelling doom for the speech of less technologically advanced peoples whose lands are suddenly opened to outside contacts. The Trans-Siberian Railroad, built about a century ago, spread the Russian language eastward to the Pacific Ocean. The Alaska Highway, which runs through Canada, carried English into Native American refuges. The construction of highways in Brazil's remote Amazonian interior threatens the native languages of that region.

Another example is the predominance of English on the Internet, which can be understood as a contemporary information highway (Figure 4.13). What will happen when other languages begin to challenge the dominance of English on the Internet? This will inevitably happen sooner or later, although exactly when English will be surpassed by another language is anyone's guess. For example, from 2000 to 2010 there was a truly impressive 1277 percent growth in the number of Chinese speakers on the Internet. If this trend continues, and when—not if—the 77 percent of



**FIGURE 4.13** The 10 most prevalent languages on the Internet as of 2010, measured as a percentage of total users. English is the second most widely spoken language on Earth, after Mandarin Chinese. And English is the most widely spoken second language in the world. It dominates the Internet as well. (Adapted from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats7.htm>.)

Chinese speakers who do not now use the Internet begin to log on, we can expect Chinese to surpass English as the most popular language on the Internet. Speakers of other languages grew even more impressively over this time period. For instance, Arabic-speaking Internet users grew 2501 percent from 2000 to 2010, while speakers of Russian grew 1826 percent over the same period.

### Reflecting on Geography

Can we view the Internet as a principal transportation route responsible for spreading English throughout the world today? If so, what does the spread of Internet access to areas formerly isolated by their physical landscape mean for the survival of linguistic minorities?

### Texting and Language Modification

Though English may dominate the Internet (see Figure 4.13, page 131), much of what comes across our computer and cell phone screens isn't a readily recognizable form of English. As with the diffusion of spoken English to far-flung regions of the British Empire, the English language that is spread via electronic correspondence is subject to significant modification. E-mailing, instant messaging, and text messaging Standard English on cell phones requires a lot of typing, and text is notoriously deficient in conveying emotions when compared to the spoken word. For these reasons, users often use abbreviations and symbols to shorten the number of key-strokes used, to add emotional punctuation to their correspondence, and to make electronic communication hard to monitor by those who don't understand the language—particularly parents and teachers! (See the cartoon below.)

English is an alphabetic writing system, where letters represent discrete sounds that must be strung together to form a word's complete sound. A second major writing system is syllabic, where characters represent blocks of word

sounds. This type of writing, prevalent throughout the Middle East and Southeast Asia, includes Arabic, Hebrew, Hindi, and Thai. The third form of writing is logographic, where characters represent entire words. Chinese is the only major language in this category.

English-speaking texters quickly learn to take shortcuts around the lengthiness inherent to alphabetic writing systems. The simplest and most commonly used shortcut involves using acronyms instead of whole words to convey common phrases. *POS* (parent over shoulder), *AFK* (away from keyboard), *VBG* (very big grin), *LOL* (laughing out loud), and *GMTA* (great minds think alike) are some examples of this technique. Another shortcut involves using characters that sound like words. For example, the number "8" can substitute for the word or sound "ate," so "h8" is "hate," and "i 8" is "I ate." In the first example, a syllabic approach to writing is used because "8" condenses the syllable "ate" into one character. Another technique involves using symbols to substitute for entire words. Using "8" for the word "ate" is an example of this technique, called rebus writing, where a symbol is used for what it sounds like as opposed to what it stands for. As your instructor for this class will likely confirm, such abbreviations and symbols have even worked their way into term papers at the college level, much to the consternation or delight of language scholars.

The use of symbols such as ☺ and ♥, which are called pictograms, or word pictures, is similar to Chinese writing. Their popularity has resulted in a vast lexicon of pictograms as well as simpler symbol groupings, called emoticons, used to convey entire words, ideas, and emotions in a compact and often humorous form. Here are some examples:

- :-) (user is smiling or joking)
- :-@ (user is screaming or cursing)
- :-# (well, shut my mouth!)

Although the meaning of these symbols is understood by speakers of many languages because of their ubiquity, non-English languages also employ their own symbol combinations. In Korean, for instance, ^^ is used instead of :) to convey a smiling face and -\_- is used instead of :( to depict a sad face. In Chinese, the number "5" is pronounced in a way that resembles crying, so "555" is the Chinese texter's way of conveying sadness.

Spoken and written English are quickly picking up these cyberspeech patterns with expressions such as *PITA*, which is used to indicate that someone is a "pain in the ass" without actually saying so, and *G2G*, which is uttered instead of the marginally longer sounds "got to go" for which this acronym stands. As speakers of non-English languages become more heavily involved in texting-based activities, their spoken and written languages also doubtless will become modified.



"FIRST PAPER I'VE HAD TO GRADE  
WRITTEN ENTIRELY IN EMOTICONS."

## Language Proliferation: One or Many?

Could all the world's languages have derived from one single mother tongue? It may seem a large leap from the primordial tongue to a consideration of globalization and languages, but, in fact, the two are related. If we humans began with one language, why shouldn't we return to that condition? If one language became 15,000 and the 6000 or so that remain will dwindle to 300 within a century, then why not end up with one again?

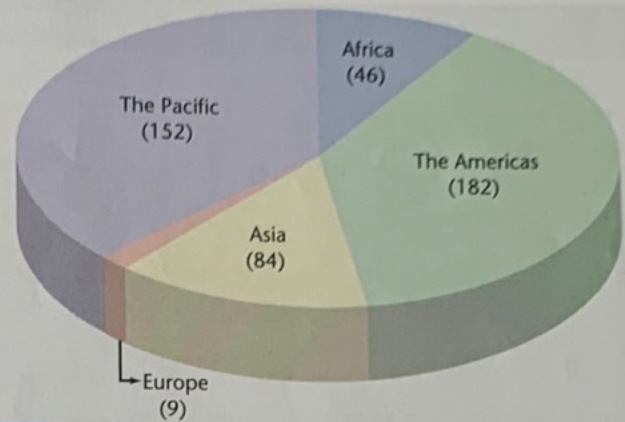
Are the forces of modernization working to produce, through cultural diffusion, a single world language? And if so, what will that language be? English? Worldwide, about 343 million people speak English as their mother tongue and perhaps another 350 million speak it well as a second, learned language. Adding other reasonably competent speakers who can "get by" in English, the world total reaches about 1.5 billion, more than for any other language. What's more, the Internet is one of the most potent agents of diffusion, and its language, overwhelmingly, is English.

English earlier diffused widely with the British Empire and U.S. imperialism, and today it has become the de facto language of globalization. Consider the case of India, where the English language imposed by British rulers was retained (after independence) as the country's language of business, government, and education. It provided some linguistic unity for India, which had 800 indigenous languages and dialects. This is why today many of India's nearly 1 billion people speak English well enough to provide customer support services over the telephone for clients in the United States. Even so, many people resent its use and wish India to be rid of this hated linguistic colonial legacy once and for all (see Figure 4.25, page 141). Although English is not likely to be driven out of India any time soon, it is true that the spoken English of India has drifted away from Standard British English. The same holds true for the English of Singapore, which is now a separate language called Singlish. Many other regional, English-based languages have developed, languages that could not be readily understood in London or Chicago.

But is the diffusion of English to the entire world population likely? Will globalization and cultural diffusion produce one world language? Probably not. More likely, the world will be divided largely among 5 to 10 major languages.

## Language and Cultural Survival

Because language is the primary way of expressing culture, if a language dies out, there is a good chance that the culture of its speakers will, too. Languages, like animal species, are classified as endangered or extinct. Endangered languages are those that are not being taught to children by their parents and are not being used actively in everyday matters.



**FIGURE 4.14** Distribution of the world's nearly extinct languages.

This chart shows the regional distribution of the world's nearly extinct languages, or those languages that have only a few elderly speakers still living. Nearly extinct languages account for 6 percent of the world's total existing languages. (Source: Adapted from Ethnologue, "Nearly Extinct Languages.")

Some linguists believe that more than half of the world's roughly 6000 languages are endangered. Ethnologue, an online language resource (see Linguistic Geography on the Internet, page 145) for this web site address, considers 473 world languages to be nearly extinct. Languages that have only a few elderly speakers still living fall into this category. The Americas and the Pacific regions together account for more than three-quarters of the world's current nearly extinct languages, thanks to their many and varied indigenous language groups (Figure 4.14). In Argentina, for example, only five families speak Vilela, and only seven or eight speakers of Tuscarora remain in Canada. When these speakers die, it is likely that their language will die out with them.

As Figure 4.14 shows, almost 40 percent of the world's nearly extinct languages are found in the Americas. They represent a wealth of Native American languages that are slowly becoming suffocated by English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Other **language hotspots**—places with the most unique, misunderstood, or endangered tongues—are located around the globe (Figure 4.15, page 134). Two of the world's five most vulnerable regions—northern Australia, central South America, North America's upper Pacific coast, eastern Siberia, and Oklahoma—are located in the United States.

**language hotspots**  
Those places on Earth that are home to the most unique, misunderstood, or endangered languages.

Languages can also be used to keep cultural traditions alive by speaking them repeatedly. Keith Basso, an anthropologist who has written an intriguing book titled *Wisdom Sits in Places*, discusses the landscape of distinctive place-names used by the Western Apache of New Mexico. The people Basso studied use place-names to invoke stories that help the Western Apache remember their collective history. According to Nick Thompson, one of Basso's interviewees, "White



**FIGURE 4.15** Global “language hotspots.” The Enduring Voices Project and the National Geographic Society have teamed up to document endangered languages and thereby attempt to prevent language extinction. (Source: Anderson and Harrison, 2007.)

men need paper maps. . . . We have maps in our minds.” Thompson goes on to assert that calling up the names of places can guard against forgetting the correct way of living, or adopting the bad habits of white men, once Western Apaches move to other areas. “The names of all these places are good. They make you remember how to live right, so you want to replace yourself again.” One of the places Basso heard about is called Shades of Shit. Here is what he was told:

*It happened here at Shades of Shit.*

*They had much corn, those people who lived here, and their relatives had only a little. They refused to share it. Their relatives begged them but still they refused to share it.*

*Then their relatives got angry and forced them to stay at home. They wouldn’t let them go anywhere, not even to defecate. So they had to do it at home. Their shades [shelters] filled up with it. There was more and more of it! It was very bad! Those people got sick and nearly died.*

*Then their relatives said, “You have brought this on yourselves. Now you live in shades of shit!” Finally, they agreed to share their corn.*

*It happened at Shades of Shit. (p. 24)*

Today, merely standing at this place or speaking its graphic name reminds the Western Apache that stinginess is a vice that can threaten the survival of the entire community.

Related to linguistic extinction is the existence of so-called remnant languages that survive, typically in small linguistic islands that are surrounded by the dominant language. One example is Khoisan, found in the Kalahari Desert of southwestern Africa and characterized by distinc-

tive clicking sounds. The pockets of Khoisan seen in Figure 4.3 (pages 118–119) survived after the expansion of the Bantu, discussed earlier (see Figure 4.6, page 122). Other remnant languages include Dravidian, spoken by hundreds of millions of people in southern India, adjacent northern Sri Lanka, and a part of Pakistan, as well as Australian Aborigine, Papuan, Caucasian, Nilo-Saharan, Paleosiberian, Inuktitut, and a variety of Native American language families. In a few cases, individual minor languages represent the sole survivors of former families. Basque, spoken in the borderland between Spain and France, is such a survivor, unrelated to any other language in the world.



## Nature-Culture

*What relationships exist between language and the physical environment? Language interacts with the environment in two basic ways. First, the specific physical*

habitats in which languages evolve help shape their vocabularies. Second, the environment can guide the migrations of linguistic groups or provide refuges for languages in retreat. The following section, from the viewpoint of possibilism—the notion that the physical environment shapes, but does not fully determine, cultural phenomena—illustrates how the physical environment influences vocabulary and the distribution of language.

## Habitat and Vocabulary

Humankind’s relationship to the land played a strong role in the emergence of linguistic differences, even at the level

**TABLE 4.2** Some Spanish Words Describing Mountains and Hills

| Spanish Word                      | English Meaning                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Candelas</i>                   | Literally “candles”; a collection of <i>peñas</i>                                                                                     |
| <i>Ceja</i>                       | Steep-sided breaks or escarpments separating two plains of different elevations                                                       |
| <i>Cejita</i>                     | A low escarpment                                                                                                                      |
| <i>Cerrillo</i> or <i>cerrito</i> | A small <i>cerro</i> ; a hill                                                                                                         |
| <i>Cerro</i>                      | A single eminence, intermediate in size between English <i>hill</i> and <i>mountain</i>                                               |
| <i>Chiquito</i>                   | Literally “small,” describing minor secondary fringing elevations at the base of and parallel to a <i>sierra</i> or <i>cordillera</i> |
| <i>Cordillera</i>                 | A mass of mountains, as distinguished from a single mountain summit                                                                   |
| <i>Cuchilla</i>                   | Literally “knife”; the comblike secondary crests that project at right angles from the sides of a <i>sierra</i>                       |
| <i>Cumber</i>                     | The highest elevation or peak within a <i>sierra</i> or <i>cordillera</i> ; a summit                                                  |
| <i>Eminencia</i>                  | A mountainous or hilly protuberance                                                                                                   |
| <i>Loma</i>                       | A hill in the midst of a plain                                                                                                        |
| <i>Lomita</i>                     | A small hill in the midst of a plain                                                                                                  |
| <i>Mesa</i>                       | Literally “table”; a flat-topped eminence                                                                                             |
| <i>Montaña</i>                    | Equivalent to English <i>mountain</i>                                                                                                 |
| <i>Pelado</i>                     | A barren, treeless mountain                                                                                                           |
| <i>Pelon</i>                      | A bare conical eminence                                                                                                               |
| <i>Peloncilla</i>                 | A small <i>pelon</i>                                                                                                                  |
| <i>Peña</i>                       | A needlelike eminence                                                                                                                 |
| <i>Picacho</i>                    | A peaked or pointed eminence                                                                                                          |
| <i>Pico</i>                       | A summit point; English <i>peak</i>                                                                                                   |
| <i>Sandia</i>                     | Literally “watermelon”; an oblong, rounded eminence                                                                                   |
| <i>Sierra</i>                     | An elongated mountain mass with a serrated crest                                                                                      |
| <i>Tinaja</i>                     | A solitary, hemispheric mountain shaped like an inverted bowl                                                                         |

(Source: Hill, 1986.)

of vocabulary. For example, the Spanish language—which originated in Castile, Spain, a dry and relatively barren land rimmed by hills and high mountains—is especially rich in words describing rough terrain, allowing speakers of this tongue to distinguish even subtle differences in the shape and configuration of mountains, as **Table 4.2** reveals. Similarly, Scottish Gaelic possesses a rich vocabulary to describe types of topography; this terrain-focused vocabulary is a common attribute of all the Celtic languages spoken by hill peoples. In the Romanian tongue, also born of a rugged landscape, words relating to mountainous features emphasize use of that terrain for livestock herding. English, by contrast, which developed in the temperate wet coastal plains of northern Europe, is relatively deficient in words describing mountainous terrain (**Figure 4.16**). However, English



**FIGURE 4.16** A scene in the desert of the western United States. “Mountains,” yes, but what kind of mountains? (See Table 4.2.) The English language cannot describe such a place adequately because it is the product of a very different, humid and cool, physical landscape. As a result, the ability of English speakers to name dryland environmental features will be less precise in such places. (David Muench/Corbis.)

abounds with words describing flowing streams and wetlands: typical physical features found in northern Europe. This vocabulary transferred well to the temperate East Coast of the United States. In the rural American South alone, one finds *river*, *creek*, *branch*, *fork*, *prong*, *run*, *bayou*, and *slough*. This vocabulary indicates that the area is a well-watered land with a dense network of streams.

Clearly, then, language serves an adaptive strategy. Vocabularies are highly developed for those features of the environment that involve livelihood. Without such detailed vocabularies, it would be difficult to communicate sophisticated information relevant to the community's livelihood, which in most places is closely bound to the physical landscape.

### The Habitat Helps Shape Language Areas

Environmental barriers and natural routes have often guided linguistic groups onto certain paths. The wide distribution of the Austronesian language group, as we have seen, was profoundly affected by prevailing winds and water currents in the Pacific and Indian oceans. The Himalayas and the barren Deccan Plateau deflected migrating Indo-Europeans entering the Indian subcontinent into the rich Ganges-Indus river plain. Even today in parts of India, according to Charles Bennett, the Indo-European/Dravidian "language boundary seems to approximate an ecological boundary" between the black soils of the plains and the thinner, reddish Deccan soils.

Because such physical barriers as mountain ridges can discourage groups from migrating from one area to another, they often serve as linguistic borders as well. In parts of the Alps, speakers of German and Italian live on opposite sides of a major mountain ridge. Portions of the mountain rim along the northern edge of the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East form the border between Semitic and Indo-European tongues. Linguistic borders that follow such physical features generally tend to be stable, and they often endure for thousands of years. By contrast, language borders that cross plains and major routes of communication are often unstable.

### The Habitat Provides Refuge

The environment also influences language insofar as inhospitable areas provide protection and isolation. Such areas often provide minority linguistic groups refuge from aggressive neighbors and are, accordingly, referred to as **linguistic refuge areas**. Rugged hilly and mountainous areas, excessively cold or dry climates, dense

**FIGURE 4.17** The environment provides a linguistic refuge in the Caucasus Mountains. The rugged mountainous region between the Black and Caspian seas—including parts of Armenia, Russia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan—is peopled by a great variety of linguistic groups, representing three major language families. Mountain areas are often linguistic mosaics because the rough terrain provides refuge and isolation. For more information about this fascinating and diverse region, see Wixman, 1980.

forests, remote islands, and extensive marshes and swamps can all offer protection to minority language groups. For one thing, unpleasant environments rarely attract conquerors. Also, mountains tend to isolate the inhabitants of one valley from those in adjacent ones, discouraging contact that might lead to linguistic diffusion.

Examples of these linguistic refuge areas are numerous. The rugged Caucasus Mountains and nearby ranges in central Eurasia are populated by a large variety of peoples and languages (Figure 4.17). In the Rocky Mountains of northern New Mexico, an archaic form of Spanish survives, largely as a result of isolation that ended only in the early 1900s. Similarly, the Alps, the Himalayas, and the highlands of Mexico form fine-grained linguistic mosaics, thanks to the mountains that provide both isolation and protection for multitudinous languages. The Dhofar, a mountain tribe in Oman, preserves Hamitic speech, a language family otherwise vanished from all of Asia. Bitterly cold tundra climates of the far north have sheltered Uralic and Inuktitut speakers, and a desert has shielded Khoisan speakers from Bantu invaders. In short, rugged, hostile, or isolated environments protect linguistic groups that might otherwise be eclipsed by more dominant languages.

Still, environmental isolation is no longer the vital linguistic force it once was. Fewer and fewer places are so isolated that they remain little touched by outside influences. Today, inhospitable lands may offer linguistic refuge, but it is no longer certain that they will in the future. Even an island situated in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean does not offer reliable refuge in an age of airplanes, satellite-transmitted communications, and global tourism. Similarly, marshes and forests provide refuge only if they are not drained and cleared by those who wish to use the land more intensively. The nearly 10,000 Gullah-speaking descendants of African slaves have long nurtured their distinctive African-influenced culture and language, in part because they reside on the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Georgia, and North Florida. Today, the development of these islands for tourism and housing for wealthy nonlocals, as well as the out-migration of Gullah youth in search of better economic opportunities, threatens the survival of the Gullah culture and language. The reality of the world is no longer isolation, but contact.

#### linguistic refuge area

An area protected by isolation or inhospitable environmental conditions in which a language or dialect has survived.



### CAUCASIC LANGUAGES

|                      |                  |
|----------------------|------------------|
| <b>Circassian</b>    | <b>Dagestani</b> |
| <b>A</b> Abkhazi     | <b>A</b> Agul    |
| <b>Adygey</b>        | <b>A</b> Avar    |
| <b>C</b> Cherkessian | <b>D</b> Dargin  |
| <b>Kabardin</b>      | <b>L</b> Lak     |
|                      | <b>L</b> Lezgin  |
| <b>Georgian</b>      | <b>R</b> Rutul   |
| <b>Georgian</b>      | <b>Tabasaran</b> |
|                      | <b>Tsakhur</b>   |
| <b>Veinakh</b>       |                  |
| <b>Chechen</b>       |                  |
| <b>I</b> Ingushi     |                  |

### INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

|                 |
|-----------------|
| <b>Armenian</b> |
| <b>Armenian</b> |
| <b>Greek</b>    |
| <b>Greek</b>    |
| <b>Iranic</b>   |
| <b>Kurdish</b>  |
| <b>Ossetian</b> |
| <b>T</b> Talysh |
| <b>Slavic</b>   |
| <b>Russian</b>  |

### ALTAIC LANGUAGES

|                    |
|--------------------|
| <b>Turkic</b>      |
| <b>A</b> Azeri     |
| <b>Balkar</b>      |
| <b>Karachay</b>    |
| <b>Kumyk</b>       |
| <b>Nogay</b>       |
| <b>Turkmenian</b>  |
| <b>Mongol</b>      |
| <b>K</b> Kalmykian |



## CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

*In what ways are languages visible and, as a result, part of the cultural landscape?*

Road signs, billboards, graffiti, placards, and other publicly displayed writings not only reveal the locally dominant language but also can be a visual index to bilingualism, linguistic oppression of minorities, and other facets of linguistic geography (Figure 4.18). Furthermore, differences in writing systems render some linguistic landscapes illegible to those not familiar with these forms of writing (Figure 4.19).

### Messages

Linguistic landscapes send messages, both friendly and hostile. Often these messages have a political content and deal with power, domination, subjugation, or freedom. In Turkey, for example, until recently Kurdish-speaking minorities were not allowed to broadcast music or television programs in Kurdish, to publish books in Kurdish, or even to give their children Kurdish names. Because Turkey wishes to join the European Union, these minority language restrictions have come under intense outside scrutiny. In 2002, Turkey reformed its legal restrictions to allow the Kurdish language to be used in daily life but not

in public education. The Canadian province of Québec, similarly, has tried to eliminate English-language signs. French-speaking immigrants settled Québec, and its official language is French, in contrast to Canada's policy elsewhere of bilingualism in English and French. As Figure 4.20 indicates, there is a movement in Ireland to replace English-language place-name signs with signs depicting the original Gaelic place-names. The suppression of minority languages and attempts to reinstate them in the landscape offer an indication of the social and political status of minority populations more generally.

Other types of writing, such as gang-related graffiti, can denote ownership of territory or send messages to others that they are not welcome (Figure 4.21). Only those who understand the specific gang symbols used will be able to decipher the message. Misreading such writing can have dangerous consequences for those who stray into unfriendly territory. In this way, gang symbols can be understood as a dialect that is particular to a subculture and transmitted through symbols or a highly stylized script.



**FIGURE 4.18** Samoan, a Polynesian language belonging to the Austronesian family, becomes part of the linguistic landscape of Apia, the capital of independent Western Samoa in the Pacific Ocean. When this area was still a British colony, such a visual display of the native language would not have been permitted. (Courtesy of Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov.)



**FIGURE 4.19** Linguistic landscapes can be hard to read for those who are not familiar with the script used for writing. For many English-speaking monoglots, who are visually accustomed to the Latin alphabet, the linguistic landscape of countries such as Korea appears illegible. (Courtesy of Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov.)

## Toponyms

Language and culture also intersect in the names that people place on the land, whether they are given to settlements, terrain features, streams, or various other aspects of their surroundings. These place-names, or **toponyms**, often directly reflect the spatial patterns of language, dialect, and ethnicity. Toponyms become

### toponym

A place-name, usually consisting of two parts, the generic and the specific.

part of the cultural landscape when they appear on signs and placards. Toponyms can be very revealing because, as geographer Stephen Jett said, they often provide insights into “linguistic origins, diffusion, habitat, and environmental perception.” Many place-names consist of two parts—the generic and the specific. For example, in the American place-names Huntsville, Harrisburg, Ohio River, Newfound Gap, and Cape Hatteras, the specific segments are *Hunts-*, *Harris-*, *Ohio*, *Newfound*, and *Hatteras*. The generic parts, which tell what *kind* of place is being described, are *-ville*, *-burg*, *River*, *Gap*, and *Cape*.

**Generic toponyms** are of greater potential value to the cultural geographer than specific names because they appear again and again throughout a culture region. There are literally thousands

### generic toponym

The descriptive part of many place-names, often repeated throughout a culture area.

of generic place-names, and every culture or subculture has its own distinctive set of them. They are particularly valuable both in tracing the spread of a culture and in reconstructing culture regions of the past. Sometimes generic toponyms provide information about changes people wrought long ago in their physical surroundings.

## Generic Toponyms of the United States

The three dialects of the eastern United States (see Figure 4.10)—Northern, Midland, and Southern—illustrate the value of generic toponyms in cultural geographical detective work. For example, New Englanders, speakers of the Northern dialect, often used the terms *Center* and *Corners* in the names of the towns or hamlets. Outlying settlements frequently bear the prefix *East*, *West*, *North*, or *South*, with the specific name of the township as the suffix. Thus, in Randolph Township, Orange County, Vermont, we find settlements named Randolph Center, South Randolph, East Randolph, and North Randolph (Figure 4.22). A few miles away lies Hewitts Corners.

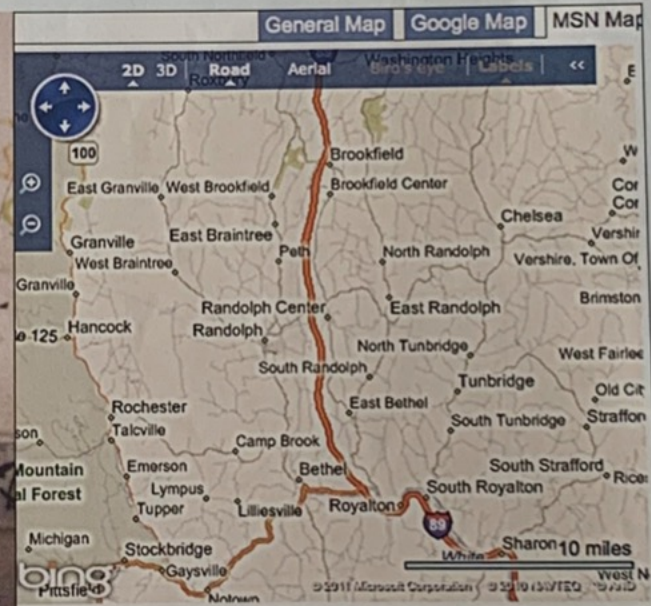
These generic usages and duplications are peculiar to New England, and we can locate areas settled by New Englanders as they migrated westward by looking for such place-names in other parts of the country. A trail of



**FIGURE 4.20** Road sign in Dublin, Ireland, shows directions in Irish Gaelic on top and English underneath. (JoeFoxDublin/Alamy.)



**FIGURE 4.21** Graffiti is used to mark gang territory. This wall in the Polanco neighborhood of Guadalajara, Mexico, is covered with graffiti. Gangs use stylized scripts that are often unintelligible to nonmembers to mark their territory. (Courtesy of Patricia L. Price.)

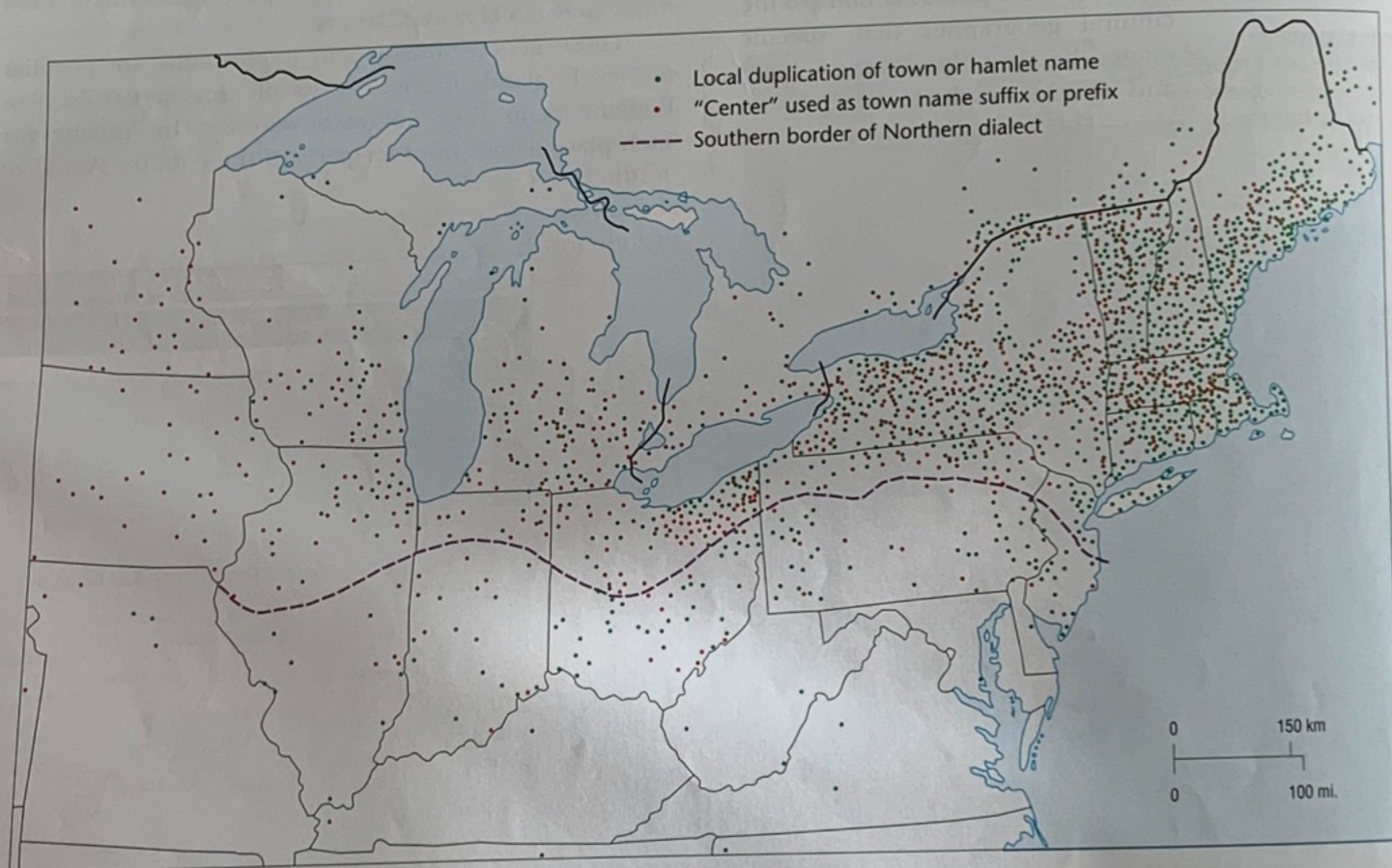


**FIGURE 4.22** This map depicts a portion of the state of Vermont, displaying the generic toponyms that abound in New England. (Courtesy of Bing.)

"Centers" and name duplications extending westward from New England through upstate New York and Ontario and into the upper Midwest clearly indicates their path of migration and settlement (**Figure 4.23**). Toponymic evidence of New England exists in areas as far afield as Walworth County, Wisconsin, where Troy, Troy Center, East Troy, and Abels Corners are clustered; in Dufferin County, Ontario, where one finds places such as Mono Centre; and even in distant Alberta, near Edmonton, where the toponym Michigan Centre doubly suggests a particular cultural diffusion. Similarly, we can identify Midland American areas by such terms as *Gap*, *Cove*, *Hollow*, *Knob* (a low, rounded hill), and *-burg*, as in Stone Gap, Cades Cove, Stillhouse Hollow, Bald Knob, and Fredericksburg. We can recognize southern speech by such names as *Bayou*, *Gully*, and *Store* (for rural hamlets), as in Cypress Bayou, Gum Gully, and Halls Store.

## Toponyms and Cultures of the Past

Place-names often survive long after the culture that produced them vanishes from an area, thereby preserving traces of the past. Australia abounds in Aborigine toponyms, even in areas from which the native peoples disappeared long ago (**Figure 4.24**). No toponyms are more permanently established than those identifying physical geographical features, such as rivers and mountains. Even the most absolute conquest, exterminating an aboriginal people, usually does not entirely destroy such names. Quite the contrary, in fact. Geographer R. D. K. Herman speaks of anticonquest, in which the defeated people finds its toponyms venerated and perpetuated by the conqueror, who at the same time denies the people any real power or cultural influence. The abundance of Native American toponyms in the United States provides an example (see *Doing Geography*



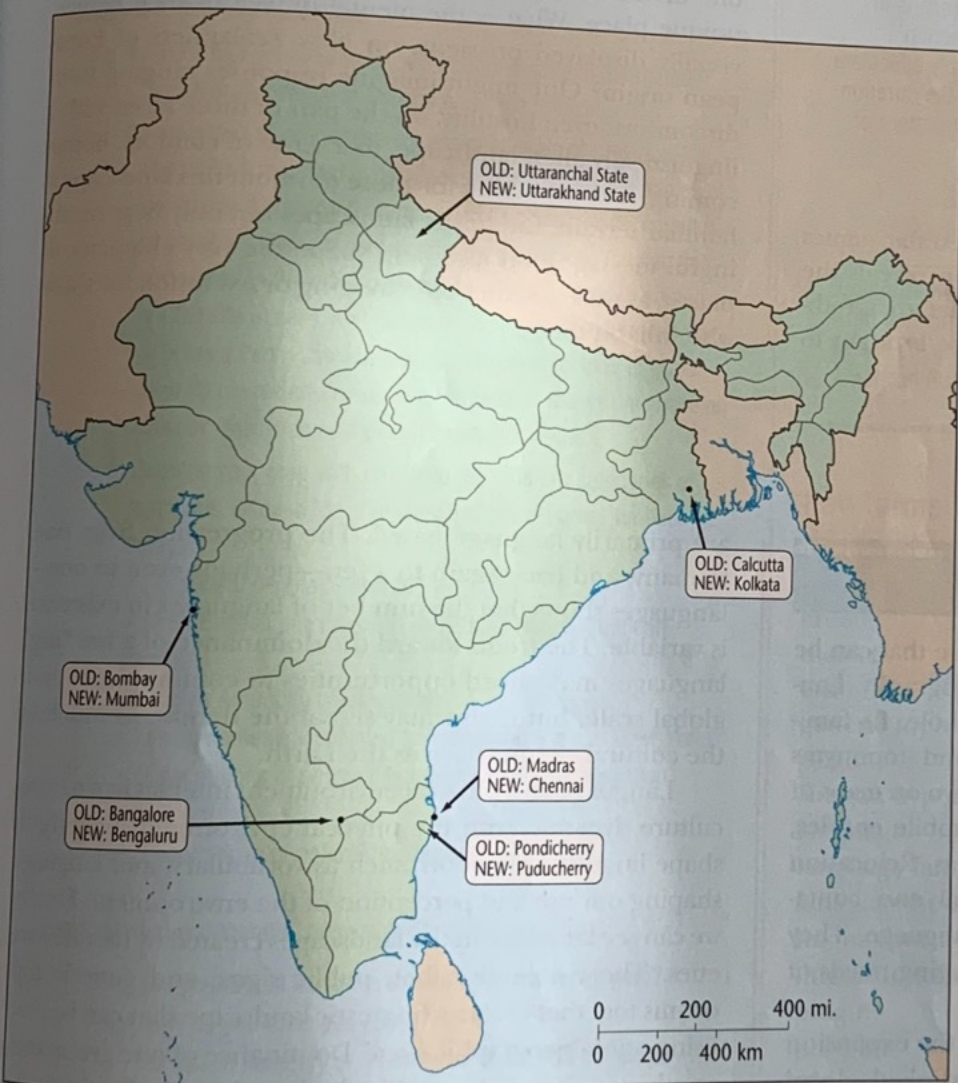
**FIGURE 4.23** Generic place-names reveal the migration of Yankee New Englanders and the spread of the Northern dialect. Two of the most typical place-name characteristics in New England are the use of *Center* in the names of the principal settlements in a political subdivision and the tendency to duplicate the names of local towns and villages by adding the prefixes *East*, *West*, *North*, and *South* to the subdivision's name. As the concentration of such place-names suggests, these two Yankee traits originated in Massachusetts, the first New England colony. Note how these toponyms moved westward with New England settlers but thinned out rapidly to the south, in areas not colonized by New Englanders.



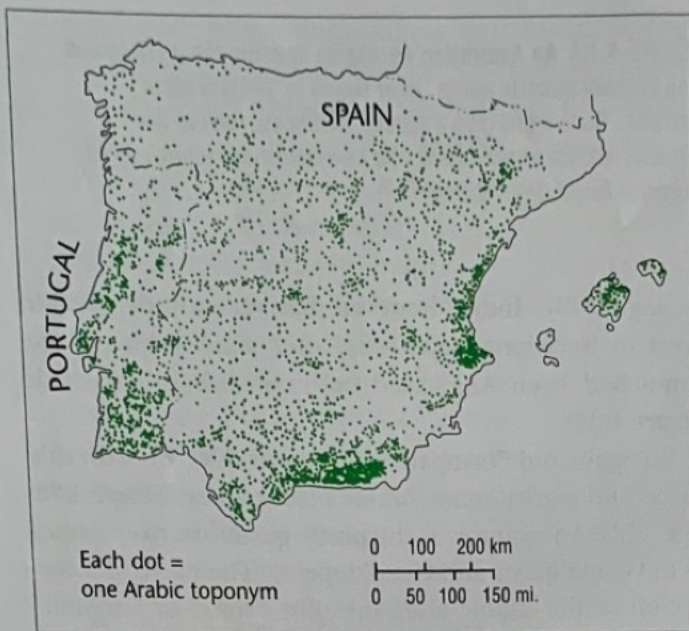
**FIGURE 4.24** An Australian Aborigine specific toponym joined to an English generic name, near Omeo in Victoria state, Australia. Such signs give a special, distinctive look to the linguistic landscape and speak of a now-vanished culture region. (Courtesy of Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov.)

on page 143). India, however, has recently decided to revert to traditional toponyms, after many Indian place-names had been Anglicized under British colonial rule (Figure 4.25).

In Spain and Portugal, seven centuries of Moorish rule left behind a great many Arabic place-names (Figure 4.26, page 142). An example is the prefix *guada-* on river names (as in Guadalquivir and Guadalupejo). The prefix is a corruption of the Arabic *wadi*, meaning “river” or “stream.” Thus, Guadalquivir, corrupted from Wadi-al-Kabir, means



**FIGURE 4.25** India's postcolonial toponym shift. More than 50 years after the English colonizers “quit” India, their colonial place-names are being swept from the map, too. (Adapted from Sappentfield, 2006.)



**FIGURE 4.26 Arabic toponyms in Iberia.** Arabic, a Semitic language, spread into Spain and Portugal with the Moors more than a thousand years ago. Romance Indo-European speakers subsequently reconquered the Arabic-speaking North Africans in Iberia. A reminder of the Semitic language survives in Iberian toponyms, or place-names. Using this map, you can easily speculate about the direction of the Moorish invasion and retreat, the duration of Moorish rule in different parts of Iberia, and the main centers of former Moorish power. (Source: Houston, 1967.)

“the great river.” The frequent occurrence of Arabic names in any particular region or province of Spain reveals the remnants of Moorish cultural influence in that area, rather than anticonquest. Many such names were brought to

the Americas through Iberian conquest, so that Guadalajara, for example, appears on the map as an important Mexican city.

New Zealand, too, offers some intriguing examples of the subtle messages that can be conveyed by archaic toponyms. The native Polynesian people of New Zealand are the Maori. As cultural geographer Hong-key Yoon has observed, the survival rate of Maori names for towns varies according to the size of their populations. The smaller the town, the more likely it is to bear a Maori name. The four largest New Zealand cities all have European names, but of the 20 regional centers, with populations of 10,000 to 100,000, 40 percent have Maori names. Almost 60 percent of the small towns, with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, bear Maori toponyms. Similarly, whereas only 20 percent of New Zealand’s provinces have Maori names, 56 percent of the counties do. Nearly all streams, hills, and mountains retain Maori names. The implication is that the British settlement of New Zealand was largely an urban phenomenon.

These Maori toponyms, which are heard and seen as one drives across New Zealand, help make the country a unique place. What is the mental impact of such names, visually displayed on signs, on New Zealanders of European origin? One might imagine responses ranging from discomfort, even hostility, on the part of those faced with a linguistically alien landscape, to a sense of comfort, homecoming, and belonging for those to whom this landscape is familiar terrain. Linguistic landscapes not only bear meaningful messages but also help shape the very character of places, as well as senses of belonging or exclusion for those who inhabit them.

## CONCLUSION

Language, then, is an essential part of culture that can be studied using the five themes of cultural geography. Language is firmly enmeshed in the cultural whole. Its families, dialects, vocabulary, pronunciation, and toponyms display distinct spatial variations that are shown on maps of linguistic culture regions. Languages are mobile entities, ebbing and flowing across geographical areas. Relocation and expansion diffusion, both hierarchical and contagious, are apparent in the movement of language. They are also shaped and reshaped with the changing needs of their users.

The globalization of language, through the expansion of ancient empires as well as today’s interlinked global exchanges, underscores the fact that human interactions

are primarily language based. The progression from one, to many, and back again to a few—perhaps even to one—languages shows that the number of languages in existence is variable. The trend toward the dominance of a few “big” languages may afford opportunities to communicate on a global scale, but it also may signal the demise of much of the cultural richness across the Earth.

Language and physical environment interact in a nature-culture dynamic, with the physical environment helping to shape linguistic elements, such as vocabulary, and language shaping our use and perception of the environment. Finally, we can see language in the landscapes created by literate societies. The visible alphabet, public signs, and generic toponyms together create a linguistic landscape that can be read using one’s “geographic eyes.” Dominance of one group over another is often expressed in the latter’s exclusion from the linguistic cultural landscape.