

What are the Most Spoken Languages in the World?

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by

What are the most spoken languages in the world?

This question isn't as simple as it may seem. There are a few complications that make it hard to give a precise answer:

First of all, what do you mean by *spoken*? Do you want to rank languages by their number of *native speakers*, or by how many people speak them_ at all_, natively or non-natively? These two approaches produce very different-looking lists.

Secondly, where do you draw the boundary between a language and a dialect? How different do two "dialects" have to be before they're considered separate languages entirely? There's often no clear answer –

and the answer you give can significantly affect a language's position in the “most-spoken” rankings.

With that being said, it's possible to come up with some rough rankings. Here's the best estimate, at the time of writing, as to the most-spoken languages in the world – going by *total* number of speakers, not just natives.

1. Mandarin Chinese (1.1 billion speakers)

Number of native speakers: 897 million

Number of non-native speakers: 193 million

Total speakers: 1.09 billion

Name in the language itself: 普通话 (Putonghua)

Language family: Sino-Tibetan

Related to: Cantonese, Tibetan, Burmese

People sometimes speak of “Chinese” as if it's a single language. It's actually a group of related languages, of which Mandarin Chinese is by far the biggest. It's an official language in the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China (Taiwan), and Singapore.

The native name for Mandarin, Putonghua, literally means “common speech”, although in Taiwan people call it Guoyu – “national language”. Historically, it was also called Guanhua – “the speech of officials”. Since Mandarin is more common in northern China, it's sometimes referred to as beifanghua (北方话) – “Northern Dialects”.

Mandarin is written using *Chinese characters* (sometimes called “Han characters”), an ancient pictorial system where each symbol represents a different word. There are two main versions – “traditional” characters, used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, and “simplified” characters, used in China, Singapore, and Malaysia. It's estimated that you need to learn 2,000-3,000 characters to read a newspaper – an educated

Chinese person will know about 8,000!

2. English (983 million speakers)

Number of native speakers: 371 million

Number of non-native speakers: 611 million

Total number of speakers: 983 million

Language-family: Germanic, a sub-family of Indo-European.

Related to: German, Dutch, Frisian

Name in the language itself: English. But you already knew that.

Thanks to the historical dominance of the British Empire – and, more recently, the economic and cultural clout of the United States – English is well-established as the world's *lingua franca* (if only there were [other contenders for an international language](#)), and is the second most spoken language in the world.

The name “English” comes from the “Angles”, a Germanic people who settled in Britain in the first millennium A.D.. They ultimately derived their name from [Anglen](#), a region in northern Germany, and of course they gave their name to the area now known as England.

At its core, English is a Germanic language. Its vocabulary and sentence structure are closest to modern languages like German and Dutch. However, it’s been heavily influenced by other languages throughout its strange history. Much English vocabulary is Latin in origin, having been introduced by the French-speaking Normans who conquered Britain in the 11th century A.D.

3. Hindustani (544 million speakers)

Number of native speakers: 329 million

Number of non-natives: 215 million

Total number of speakers: 544 million

Language family: Indo-Aryan, a sub-family of Indo-European.

Related to: Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, Kashmiri, Nepali

Name in the language itself: हिन्दुस्तानी or ہندوستانی

Hindustani is the collective name for *Hindi* and *Urdu* – two dialects of the same language. The name comes from *Hindustan*, a historical term for the north/north-western part of the Indian subcontinent.

Hindi is spoken across northern and central India, and is the official language of the Indian government. Urdu is primarily spoken in Pakistan. While Hindi and Urdu have differences in vocabulary and pronunciation, speakers of either language can easily communicate with each other.

A notable difference between Hindi and Urdu is that they use different writing systems. Hindi is usually written in in [Devanagari script](#) – called “देवनागरी” in the script itself. Urdu, on the other hand, is written right-to-left with a script that's closely related to the Arabic alphabet. The name “Urdu” itself is written “اُردُو”.

4. Spanish (527 million speakers)

Number of native speakers: 436 million

Number of non-native speakers: 91 million

Total number of speakers: 527 million

Language family: Romance, a sub-family of Indo-European.

Related to: French, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian

Name in the language itself: *español* or *castellano*

¡Sí señor! By number of *native* speakers, Spanish is the second biggest language in the world (behind only Mandarin). By *total* speakers, it's at number four.

The language now known as Spanish originated in the Castile region of Spain. For this reason, it's sometimes referred to as “Castilian” –

castellano in the language itself. Since then, Spanish explorers and *conquistadores* have spread their language all around the world. It's spoken all across South and Central America and the Caribbean, with pockets of speakers in Southeast Asia and even Africa.

(Trivia tidbit: Equatorial Guinea is the only country in Africa to have Spanish as an official language.)

Spanish is also the second most-common language in the United States, which is home to a whopping [40 million native speakers](#). This makes the U.S. the second-biggest Spanish-speaking country in the world, behind only Mexico – and it's [predicted](#) that, within our lifetimes, it'll overtake Mexico and become the largest.

5. Arabic (422 million speakers)

Number of native speakers: 290 million

Number of non-natives: 132 million

Total number of speakers: 422 million

Language family: Semitic, a sub-family of Afro-Asiatic.

Related to: Hebrew, Amharic, and Aramaic.

Name in the language itself: العَرَبِيَّة (al-'arabiyyah)

Arabic is the official language of 26 countries, although [some have argued](#) that it's not really one language, but several.

If we leave this aside and assume that there's a single tongue called "Arabic", then it's a massive language, with over 400 million speakers. It originated on the Arabian peninsula, and has since spread all across the Middle East and North Africa.

Arabic is also, of course, the language of Islam. While most Muslims are not native Arabic speakers, the language is of special importance to the world's second-largest religion. Islam holds that God (via the angel

Gabriel) literally spoke in Arabic when he dictated the Quran to Mohammed.

That was 1400 years ago, and modern Arabic dialects have changed a lot since the "Classical Arabic" of the Quran. As well as their local dialects, many Arabs also speak "Modern Standard Arabic", an academic dialect that's based on Classical Arabic.

6. Malay (281 million speakers)

Number of native speakers: 77 million

Number of non-natives: 204 million

Total number of speakers: 281 million

Language family: Austronesian

Related to: Javanese, Tagalog

Name in the language itself: *bahasa melayu*

Malay is an official language in Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia. You can also hear it being spoken in parts of Thailand and the Philippines. It's by far the largest of the Austronesian languages – a family that's thought to have originated in Taiwan.

The area in which Malay is spoken is extremely linguistically diverse. Indonesia alone is home to more than 700 living languages! *Bahasa melayu*, as it's known, has a long history in the region as a *lingua franca*, the language of government and trade.

Except Indonesians don't call it *bahasa melayu* (Malay), they call it *bahasa indonesia* (Indonesian). Malaysians call it *bahasa malyasia* (Malaysian). These dialects are mutually intelligible, and shouldn't be considered separate languages.

Just whatever you do, don't call it "Bahasa"! For some reason, foreigners often call it this, but the word *bahasa* simply means "language". Malay

isn't called "Bahasa" any more than Spanish is called "Idioma". You have been warned.

7. Russian (267 million speakers)

Number of native speakers: 153 million

Number of non-natives: 113 million

Total number of speakers: 267 million

Language family: East Slavic, a sub-family of Indo-European

Related to: Ukrainian, Belarusian

Name in the language itself: русский язык, (rússkiy yazyk)

The largest of the Slavic languages, Russian is the official language of four countries (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan). It's also widely spoken in many other countries of the former Soviet Union, and has official status in numerous sub-national territories.

Russian's closest relatives include Ukrainian and Belarusian. The three are all descended from the language that was spoken in the medieval state of the Kievan Rus. More distantly, they're related to other Slavic languages like Polish, Czech, Slovak, Bulgarian, and Serbo-Croat.

By number of *native* speakers, Russian is the biggest language in Europe. Like many of the Slavic languages, it's written with the Cyrillic alphabet ([see here](#) for some tips on how you can learn it.)

8. Bengali (261 million speakers)

Number of native speakers: 242 million

Number of non-natives: 19 million

Total number of speakers: 261 million

Language family: Indo-Aryan, a sub-family of Indo-European.

Related to: Hindustani, Punjabi, Marathi, Kashmiri, Nepali

Name in the language itself: বাংলা (Bangla)

Sometimes known in English by its native name *Bangla*, Bengali is the official language of Bangladesh and of several Indian states. In fact, it's the the second most widely spoken language in India.

Like Hindustani (mentioned above), Bengali is an Indo-Aryan language. This is a branch of the Indo-European family; other branches include the Romance and Germanic languages. In other words, Bengali and Hindustani are (believe it or not) distant cousins of English.

Bengali is written in the *Bengali alphabet*, sometimes known as Eastern Nagari or Bengali-Assamese script. It's related to Tibetan script. Natively, "bengali alphabet" translates to "bangla bôrnômala". In the alphabet itself, that looks like this: বাংলা বর্ণমালা.

Bengali script is relatively unknown in the West, but it's actually the fifth most widely-used writing system in the world. More people worldwide write in Bengali script than in Cyrillic!

9. Portuguese (229 million speakers)

Number of native speakers: 218 million

Number of non-natives: 11 million

Total number of speakers: 229 million

Language family: Romance, a sub-branch of Indo-European.

Related to: French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian

Name in the language itself: *português*

Portuguese developed from Latin and is closely related to modern Spanish. The name comes from "Portugal", whose name in turn comes from Porto, the second-largest city in that country. But the word *porto* in Portuguese simply means "port".

Someone who speaks Portuguese is called a *Lusophone*. This word comes from "Lusitania", the Roman name for the area that's now

Portugal. The vast majority of Lusophones live in Brazil, which has more than twice as many Portuguese speakers than the rest of the world put together!

The Portuguese empire once stretched far and wide, from South America to Africa to as far as India and Southeast Asia. Today, Portuguese is an official language in nine countries, as well as in the Chinese territory of Macau.

Personally, I find Brazilian Portuguese to be an extremely beautiful language. That's just one of [many great reasons to learn it](#).

10. French (229 million speakers)

Number of native speakers: 76 million

Number of non-natives: 153 million

Total number of speakers: 229 million

Language family: Romance, a sub-branch of Indo-European.

Related to: Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Romanian

Name in the language itself: *le français*

Rounding up the top 10 is French, another Romance language. It's the official language of 28 countries, with the highest number of speakers in France, Canada, Belgium, then Switzerland (in that order). It's also widely spoken in parts of Western and Central Africa, on several Caribbean islands, and even on the South American mainland (in the French overseas department of French Guiana.)

French is a Romance language, but over the centuries it's taken on heavy influence from Celtic and Germanic tongues. In fact, the language (and country) are named after the *Franks*, a collection of tribes from the Middle Ages whose language, Frankish, was Germanic, not Romance.

Frankish is now extinct, but it's believed to have contributed many words

to modern French vocabulary. French, in turn, contributed many words to *English* vocabulary, largely thanks to the Norman invasion of Britain in 1066.

As well as the countries and territories that speak French today, many people worldwide speak French-based creoles – particularly in Haiti, where most of the population speak [Haitian Creole](#) as their only language. Haitian Creole is heavily influenced by French, but different enough to be considered a separate language.

5 Huge Languages That You Didn't Realise Had So Many Speakers

Did any of the top 10 most spoken languages surprise you?

While researching this post, I spotted a few languages whose size surprised me – including some I'd never even heard of before. Let's finish off with a quick look at some languages which don't get much global attention, but nevertheless have a large number of speakers.

(Note that this isn't a list of the 11th to 15th largest languages overall, although some of them are in that category.)

1. Hausa

Number of native speakers: 85 million

Number of non-natives: 65 million

Total number of speakers: 150 million

Language family: Chadic, a sub-family of Afroasiatic

Related to: Ron, Bole. More distantly: Arabic, Somali

Name in the language itself: *Yaren Hausa* or *Harshen Hausa*

Hausa just barely missed inclusion in the above list. By some estimates, it's the 11th most spoken language worldwide – although Punjabi may be

bigger (see below). By number of native speakers (85 million), Hausa is in twelfth place.

A member of the Chadic family, Hausa is the biggest language in Nigeria, and a national language of Niger. There are also many native speakers living in Chad. Across wide swathes of western and central Africa, Hausa is used as a trade language.

The Chadic languages are a sub-branch of the Afroasiatic family, meaning that Hausa is distantly related to Arabic. It's normally written in a Latin-based alphabet called *boko*, although you can sometimes see it written in *ajami*, an alphabet that's based on Arabic script.

2. Punjabi

Number of native speakers: 148 million

Number of non-natives: negligible

Total number of speakers: 148 million

Language family: Indo-Aryan, a sub-family of Indo-European.

Related to: Hindustani, Bengali, Marathi, Kashmiri, Nepali

Name in the language itself: ਪੰਜਾਬੀ or پنجابی (*panjabi*)

Punjabi is named for the [Punjab](#), a region in northern India and Eastern Pakistan. It has close to 150 million native speakers – more than Hausa, although by *total* number of speakers it's not clear whether Hausa or Punjabi is bigger.

The most commonly spoken language in Pakistan, Punjabi is a member of the Indo-Aryan family. It's also spoken by a wide diaspora – it's the fourth most common language in the United Kingdom!

Punjabi, along with its fellow Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi/Urdu and Bengali, is a very distant cousin of English (All are part of the wider Indo-European language family). What makes Punjabi very unusual among its

Indo-European relatives is that it's a tonal language.

3. Telugu

Number of native speakers: 80 million

Number of non-natives: 12 million

Total number of speakers: 92 million

Language family: Dravidian

Related to: Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada

Name in the language itself: తెలుగు (*Telugu*)

I've already mentioned three South Asian languages: Hindustani, Bengali, and Punjabi. Those are all from the Indo-European family. The next biggest South Asian language is Telugu, which is a Dravidian language (meaning that, unlike the first three, it has no known relation to English).

Telugu is the third most-common language in India, spoken mainly in the southeast of the country. It has about 75 million native speakers. That's more than the population of the U.K.!

Telugu is the fifteenth most-spoken language worldwide, and has its own rather beautiful writing system. In the language itself, the alphabet is called "తెలుగు లిపి" (*Telugu lipi*).

4. Javanese

Number of native speakers: 84 million

Number of non-natives: negligible

Total number of speakers: 84 million

Language family: Austronesian

Related to: Malay, Tagalog

Name in the language itself: *basa Jawa*

I covered *bahasa indonesia* above. But Indonesia, with 260 million people

spread over more than 17,000 islands, is home to some extraordinarily diverse cultures, and has over 700 living languages.

Most Indonesians speak a local language as well as Indonesian. The most common of those local languages is Javanese, which is spoken on (you guessed it) the island of Java. More than half of Indonesia's population lives on Java, making it the most populous island not just in Indonesia but in the entire world.

Javanese is related to Indonesian, but not super-closely; they're very much separate languages. As the Indonesian government only recognises Indonesian as the official language, this makes Java the largest language in the world not to have official status in any country.

5. Southern Quechua

Number of native speakers: 6 million

Number of non-natives: 1 million

Total number of speakers: 7 million

Language family: Quechua

Name in the language itself: Quechua

Southern Quechua has about 7 million speakers, which means it's not nearly as big as some of the other languages I could have included. For example, Gujarati and Malayalam have far more speakers but I've covered enough Indian languages already.

So what makes Southern Quechua interesting? In my mind it deserves an honourable mention, because it's the biggest of all indigenous American languages. Sadly, the Western hemisphere isn't nearly as linguistically diverse as it used to be, but Southern Quechua is still going strong.

Note that people often call this language simply *Quechua* – but, to be precise, “Quechua” is more of a language *family* than one specific

language. "Southern Quechua" is used to refer to the largest grouping of mutually intelligible dialects in the Quechua family. Its native speakers mostly live in Peru and Bolivia.

Another honourable mention should go to **Guaraní**. It has about 6 million speakers, so it's not *huge*. But it has the distinction of being the only native American language to have official status in any country (specifically, Paraguay.) It's also the only such language that's widely spoken by a large number of *non-native* people – many Guaraní-speaking Paraguayans are of European, not indigenous, descent.

There are many other languages I could include on this list – such as Sundanese (spoken by 15% of the population of Java), or Kannada, which is spoken not in the country whose name it resembles but India. (Seriously, India is *huge*.) This all goes to show – you'll never run out of languages to learn!

Are you surprised by any of the the most spoken languages? Are there any languages you were surprised *weren't* included? Do you think this list is likely to change in the near future – which languages are shrinking, and which are growing? When deciding which language to learn, does it matter how many speakers it has? Let me know your thoughts in the comments.

And finally... One of the best ways to learn a new language is with podcasts. Read more about [how to use podcasts to learn a language](#).

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George is a polyglot, linguistics nerd and travel enthusiast from the U.K. He speaks four languages and has dabbled in another five, and has been to more than forty countries. He currently lives in London.

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