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How many languages are there in the world? Author: Paul Lewis

How many languages are there? Well, I'm afraid that's one of those "it all depends" questions: how you answer it depends on what we call a language, and deciding what is and what isn't a language isn't as easy as you'd think.

Let's say you like pancakes for breakfast. Your neighbor eats the same thing, but calls them "griddlecakes". In the next county, you have to ask for "flapjacks". Now imagine that chain of contacts stretching out further. Even tiny differences wouldn't have to accumulate more than a few hundred miles before it's hard to understand people. They might even say something like "Wassup?" to mean "Hello!"

Where do you draw the line between a dialect and a language? Where does one language leave off and another begin?

Sometimes it's not so hard. People in Iraq speak Arabic; their neighbors in Iran speak Farsi, a completely unrelated language. At other times, though, the linguistic differences are small, and the answer becomes a matter of politics and sociology. Swedes and Norwegians can understand each other easily. But with different histories, customs, and governments, they see themselves as two nations, speaking two languages, not one. Same thing, more or less, goes for Malaysians and Indonesians; or Macedonians and Bulgarians.

Some groups go to great lengths to distinguish themselves from their linguistic cousins across a border: Serbs and Croats understand each other's speech just fine, but they use two different writing systems. Other groups do just the opposite:

A billion people live in China, with at least seven mutually unintelligible forms of regional speech. But they're reluctant to see themselves as separate nations, so they've clung to a not-very-phonetic ancient writing system that can be used anywhere in the country and lets them think of themselves as united-by-a-single-language.

So it's not easy to define what is or isn't a language, and counting is a matter of definitions. It also depends on when you count them. Languages are constantly disappearing, dying out; and in some cases, new ones are born. So you'll never have an exact answer to the slippery question of how many languages there are. But I can tell you who counts them. Probably the best counters are the researchers at Ethnologue, a comprehensive directory of the world's languages that just released its 15th edition. Based largely on how well speakers can understand each other, they estimate -- as of this year -- a total of around 7,000 languages spoken or signed in the world today.

Some of those 7,000 are just about extinct, with only a handful of speakers left. In fact, about a quarter of the world's languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers.

At the other end of the scale, there's a group of very dominant languages. Over the next century they'll probably drive hundreds, or even thousands, of smaller languages to extinction, just as superstores drive shopkeepers out of business. The largest by far is Mandarin -- nearly 900 million people in China speak it as a native tongue. Hindi, English, and Spanish each have over 300 million native speakers. The other big ones -- all of which have between 100 and 200 million native speakers -- are Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, Indonesian, Arabic, Japanese, German, and French.

We often think of Europe as a very multilingual place. And it does have 238 different languages. But it doesn't compare with Asia, which has 2,269 or nearly a third of the world's languages, or with Africa which it has almost as many.

The number and diversity of the world languages is amazing. You might yearn for the days before the mythical Tower of Babel, when everyone was said to speak the same tongue. But every language is a window on the culture in which it's spoken and a window on the human mind. So there are many good reasons for us to study them -- and preserve what we can of all of them.