

The Dynamics of Languages

Language is dynamic and subject to change just as today's metropolitan societies change. We have seen this in recent times with the convergence of British and American English as U.S. culture becomes evermore present in our societies. One of the best examples of how languages are derived from each other occurred after the Roman Empire collapsed in the fourth century. Latin was the common language of that empire, and after it dissolved, Latin speakers spread across Europe and became isolated from each other. The languages that developed, although derived from Latin, diverged and evolved independently to eventually produce the modern languages of Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian.

Languages in the same family share grammatical features, and many key words show a common origin. However, some languages do not have an identifiable origin with any other language. Some languages today hover on the brink of extinction, while others are enjoying a resurgence of use or a revival. Some of these languages are described below.

Euskara is spoken by about one million people in the Basque regions of Spain and France. Despite much research, no connection between Euskara and any other language has ever been proven. Structural similarities with certain languages in Asia have been noticed, but these are very few, and the connection is tenuous at best. Euskara is still considered a completely isolated and independent language. As the sole non-Indo-European language of Western Europe, Euskara is probably the only survivor of the languages that were spoken there before the Indo-Europeans arrived.

Japanese is spoken by more than 125 million people and is one of the top ten most common languages of the world. However, no definite link to any other language has ever been established, despite three centuries of exhaustive research. Although Japan adopted Chinese pictographic characters in the third century, Japanese is not related to Chinese. Some linguists believe that Japanese is related to Korean because of a resemblance in grammatical structure, but this has not yet been proven.

Korean is spoken by about 65 million people. Although Korean's grammatical structure is most similar to Japanese, its linguistic affiliation is uncertain. The Korean alphabet is the only true alphabet native to East Asia. Instead of evolving, like many other alphabets, it was invented in 1443 as a logical system of writing. Each of the 25 letters represents a single consonant or vowel.

Esperanto is the opposite of a language without roots or a common origin. It was contrived in 1887 by Dr. Zamenhof of Warsaw, Poland. His perspective was that Esperanto would allow people who speak different native languages to communicate, yet retain their own languages and cultural identities. Zamenhof believed that Esperanto was easy to learn because its grammar rules are simple and consistent. Furthermore, a small number of basic roots can be expanded into an extensive vocabulary through adding prefixes, suffixes, and infixes. Although Esperanto is purely a second language, it is estimated that up to 2 million people speak it.