

KEY ISSUE 4

Why Do People Preserve Local Languages?

- Language Diversity
- Global Dominance of English

Learning Outcome 5.4.1

Understand how several countries peacefully embrace more than one language.

The distribution of a language is a measure of the fate of a cultural group. English has diffused around the world from a small island in northwestern Europe because of the dominance of England and the United States over other territory on Earth's surface. Icelandic remains a little-used language because of the isolation of the Icelandic people.

As in other cultural traits, language displays the two competing geographic trends of globalization and local diversity. English has become the principal language of communication and interaction for the entire world. At the same time, local languages endangered by the global dominance of English are being protected and preserved.

Language Diversity

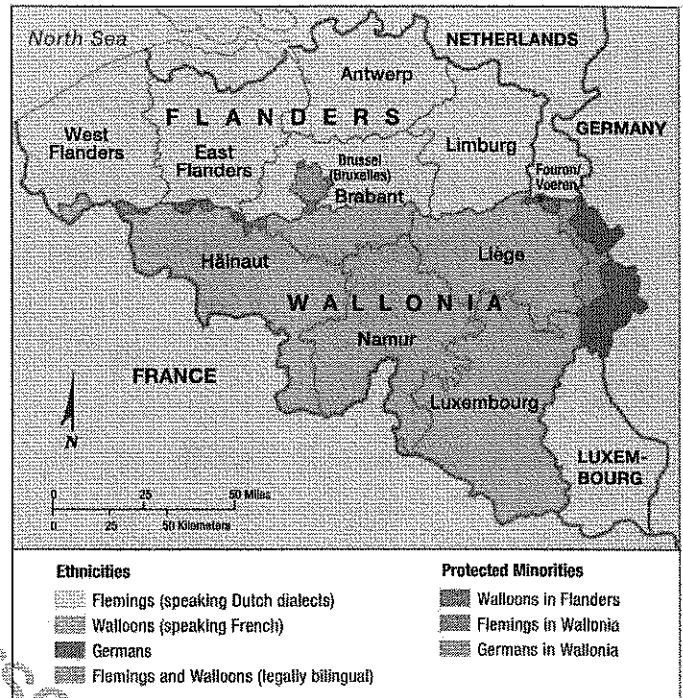
In some countries, multiple languages coexist, with varying degrees of success. Other countries maintain the use of languages that have little if any relationship to other languages.

MULTILINGUAL STATES

Difficulties can arise at the boundary between two languages. Belgium, Switzerland, and Nigeria offer examples of varying degrees of difficulties.

BELGIUM. Note in Figures 5-9 (Indo-European languages) and 5-10 (Germanic languages) that the boundary between the Romance and Germanic branches runs through the middle of two small European countries, Belgium and Switzerland. Belgium has had more difficulty than Switzerland in reconciling the interests of the different language speakers.

Southern Belgians (known as Walloons) speak French, whereas northern Belgians (known as Flemings) speak Flemish, a dialect of the Germanic language Dutch (Figure 5-27). The language boundary sharply divides the country into two regions. Antagonism between the Flemings and Walloons is aggravated by economic and political



▲ FIGURE 5-27 LANGUAGES IN BELGIUM Flemings in the north speak Flemish, a Dutch dialect. Walloons in the south speak French. The two groups have had difficulty sharing national power.

differences. Historically, the Walloons dominated Belgium's economy and politics, and French was the official state language. Brussels, the capital city, is officially bilingual, and signs are in both French and Flemish (Figure 5-28).

In response to pressure from Flemish speakers, Belgium has been divided into two autonomous regions, Flanders and Wallonia. Each elects an assembly that controls cultural affairs, public health, road construction, and urban development in its region. But for many in Flanders, regional autonomy is not enough. They want to see Belgium divided into two independent countries. Were that to occur, Flanders would be one of Europe's richest countries and Wallonia one of the poorest.

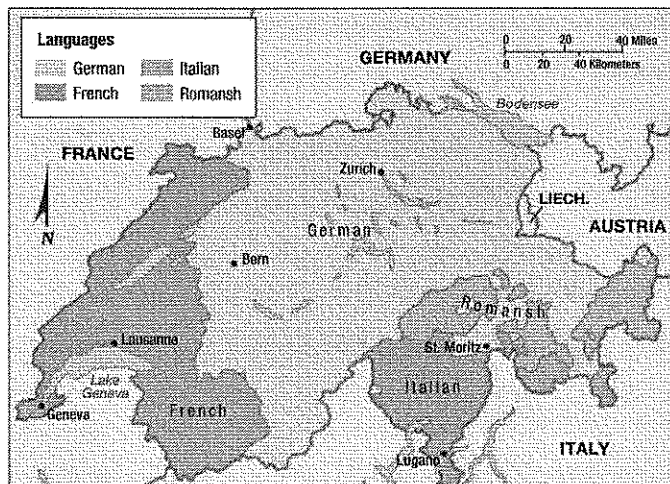
▼ FIGURE 5-28 LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN BELGIUM Delhaize, a supermarket chain in Belgium, advertises on adjacent posters "the best at the best prices" (left) in French and (right) in Flemish.



SWITZERLAND. In contrast with Belgium, Switzerland peacefully exists with multiple languages. The key is a long tradition of decentralized government, in which local authorities hold most of the power, and decisions are frequently made by voter referenda. Switzerland has four official languages—German (used by 65 percent of the population), French (18 percent), Italian (10 percent), and Romansh (1 percent). Swiss voters made Romansh an official language in a 1938 referendum, despite the small percentage of people who use the language.

Switzerland is divided into four main linguistic regions, as shown in Figure 5-29, but people living in individual communities, especially in the mountains, may use a language other than the prevailing local one. The Swiss, relatively tolerant of citizens who speak other languages, have institutionalized cultural diversity by creating a form of government that places considerable power in small communities.

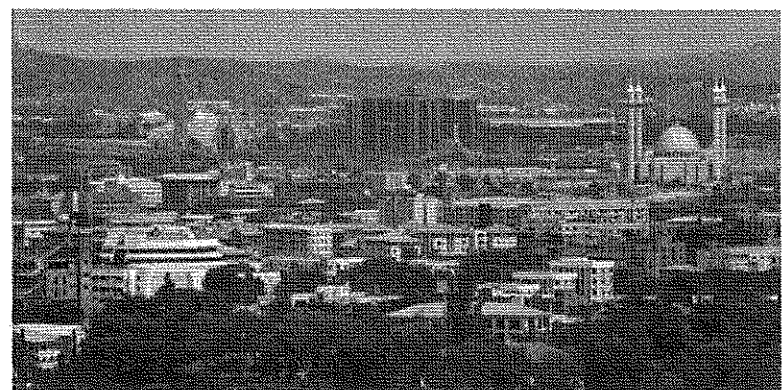
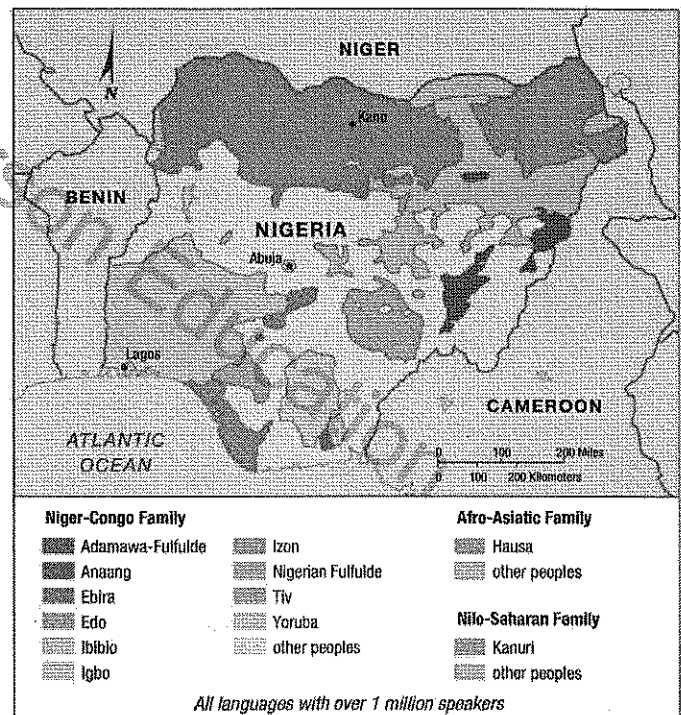
NIGERIA. Africa's most populous country, Nigeria, displays problems that can arise from the presence of many speakers of many languages. Nigeria has 527 distinct languages, according to *Ethnologue*, only three of which have widespread use—Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, each spoken by one-eighth of the population (Figure 5-30).



▲ FIGURE 5-29 LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN SWITZERLAND The map shows Switzerland's four official languages. The photo shows a sign that prevents hikers, vehicles, and horses from entering the forest because of timber cutting. German is top left, French top right, Italian lower left, and Romansh lower right. Switzerland lives peacefully with four official languages, including Romansh, which is used by only 1 percent of the population.

Groups living in different regions of Nigeria have often battled. The southern Igbos attempted to secede from Nigeria during the 1960s, and northerners have repeatedly claimed that the Yorubas discriminate against them. To reduce these regional tensions, the government has moved the capital from Lagos in the Yoruba-dominated southwest to Abuja in the center of Nigeria.

Nigeria reflects the problems that can arise when great cultural diversity—and therefore language diversity—is packed into a relatively small region. Nigeria also illustrates the importance of language in identifying distinct cultural groups at a local scale. Speakers of one language are unlikely to understand any of the others in the same language family, let alone languages from other families.



▲ FIGURE 5-30 LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN NIGERIA The map shows Nigeria's principal languages. The photo shows Nigeria's capital city Abuja, which was built in the center of the country, where none of the three largest languages dominates. The city skyline includes a cathedral (left), national bank (center), and mosque (right).

ISOLATED LANGUAGES

Learning Outcome 5.4.2

Understand what is meant by an isolated language and an extinct language.

An **isolated language** is a language unrelated to any other and therefore not attached to any language family. Similarities and differences between languages—our main form of communication—are a measure of the degree of interaction among groups of people.

The diffusion of Indo-European languages demonstrates that a common ancestor dominated much of Europe before recorded history. Similarly, the diffusion of Indo-European languages to the Western Hemisphere is a result of conquests by Indo-European speakers in more recent times. In contrast, isolated languages arise through lack of interaction with speakers of other languages.

A PRE-INDO-EUROPEAN SURVIVOR: BASQUE. The best example of an isolated language in Europe is Basque, apparently the only language currently spoken in Europe that survives from the period before the arrival of Indo-European speakers. No attempt to link Basque to the common origin of the other European languages has been successful.

Basque was probably once spoken over a wider area but was abandoned where its speakers came in contact with Indo-Europeans. It is now the first language of 666,000 people in the Pyrenees Mountains of northern Spain and southwestern France (refer to Figure 5-13, the gray area in northern Spain). Basque's lack of connection to other languages reflects the isolation of the Basque people in their mountainous homeland. This isolation has helped them preserve their language in the face of the wide diffusion of Indo-European languages (Figure 5-31).

▼ **FIGURE 5-31 BASQUE** Protestors hold banners that say, in Basque, "Stop the state of emergency; self-determination for Basque Country," during a demonstration in the Basque-speaking city of San Sebastian, Spain, in 2009.



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▲ **FIGURE 5-32 ICELANDIC** The warning sign in Icelandic and English is located in Hveragerdi, Iceland.

AN UNCHANGING LANGUAGE: ICELANDIC. Icelandic is related to other languages in the North Germanic group of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European family (Figure 5-32). Icelandic's significance is that over the past 1,000 years, it has changed less than any other language in the Germanic branch. As was the case with England, people in Iceland speak a Germanic language because their ancestors migrated to the island from the east, in this case from Norway. Norwegian settlers colonized Iceland in A.D. 874.

When an ethnic group migrates to a new location, it takes along the language spoken in the former home. The language spoken by most migrants—such as the Germanic invaders of England—changes in part through interaction with speakers of other languages. But in the case of Iceland, the Norwegian immigrants had little contact with speakers of other languages when they arrived in Iceland, and they did not have contact with speakers of their language back in Norway. After centuries of interaction with other Scandinavians, Norwegian and other North Germanic languages had adopted new words and pronunciation, whereas the isolated people of Iceland had less opportunity to learn new words and no reason to change their language.

A "DISCOVERED" LANGUAGE: KORO AKA. Isolated languages continue to be identified and documented. For example, a research team from Oregon's Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages was in India in 2008 to study other rarely spoken languages. The team heard people in the area speaking another language that was not listed in authoritative sources such as *Ethnologue*. The researchers concluded that the language, known as Koro Aka, is a distinct language that belongs to the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan, but they were not able to classify it in a group. Koro Aka has around 1,000 speakers, in northeastern India.

EXTINCT AND REVIVED LANGUAGES

Thousands of languages are extinct languages that were once in use—even in the recent past—but are no longer spoken or read in daily activities by anyone in the world. *Ethnologue* considers 473 languages to be nearly extinct

because only a few older speakers are still living, and they are not teaching the languages to their children. According to *Ethnologue*, 46 of these nearly extinct languages are in Africa, 182 in the Americas, 84 in Asia, 9 in Europe, and 152 in the Pacific.

MANY EXTINCT LANGUAGES: NATIVE AMERICANS.

When Spanish missionaries reached the eastern Amazon region of Peru in the sixteenth century, they found more than 500 languages. Only 92 survive today, according to *Ethnologue*, and 14 of these face immediate extinction because fewer than 100 speakers remain. Of Peru's 92 surviving indigenous languages, only Cusco, a Quechuan language, is currently used by more than 1 million people.

Ethnologue lists 74 languages based in the United States that are now extinct. These are languages once spoken by groups of Native Americans, especially in the West (Figure 5-33).

AN EXTINCT LANGUAGE: GOTHIC. Gothic was widely spoken by people in Eastern and Northern Europe in the third century. Not only is Gothic extinct but so is the entire language group to which it belonged, the East Germanic group of the Germanic branch of Indo-European. The last speakers of Gothic lived in the Crimea in Russia in the sixteenth century.

The Gothic language died because the descendants of the Goths were converted to other languages through processes of integration, such as political dominance and cultural preference. For example, many Gothic people switched to speaking the Latin language after their con-

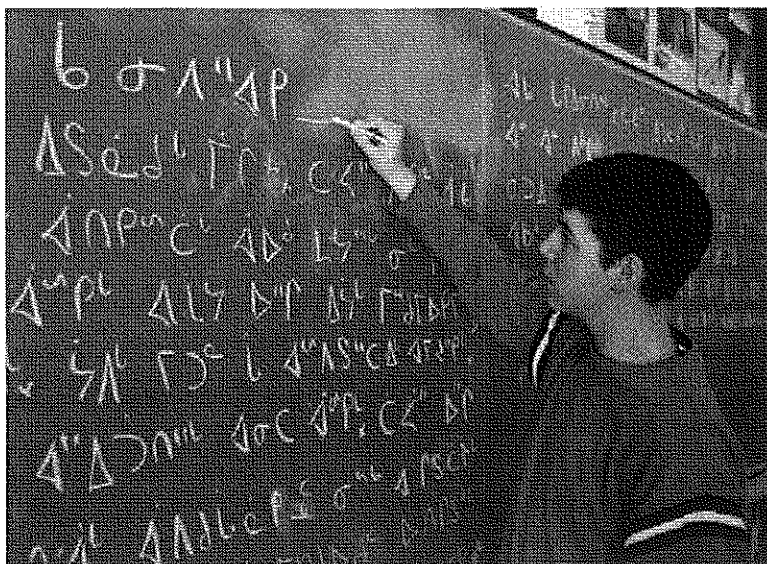
version to Christianity. Similarly, indigenous languages are disappearing in Peru as speakers switch to Spanish.

REVIVING AN EXTINCT LANGUAGE: HEBREW. Hebrew is a rare case of an extinct language that has been revived (Figure 5-34). Most of the Jewish Bible (Christian Old Testament) was written in Hebrew. (A small part of it was written in another Afro-Asiatic language, Aramaic.) A language of daily activity in biblical times, Hebrew diminished in use in the fourth century B.C. and was thereafter retained only for Jewish religious services. At the time of Jesus, people in present-day Israel generally spoke Aramaic, which in turn was replaced by Arabic.

When Israel was established as an independent country in 1948, Hebrew became one of the new country's two official languages, along with Arabic. Hebrew was chosen because the Jewish population of Israel consisted of refugees and migrants from many countries who spoke many languages. Because Hebrew was still used in Jewish prayers, no other language could so symbolically unify the disparate cultural groups in the new country.

The task of reviving Hebrew as a living language was formidable. Words had to be created for thousands of objects and inventions unknown in biblical times, such as telephones, cars, and electricity. The revival effort was initiated by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who lived in Palestine before the creation of the State of Israel and who refused to speak any language other than Hebrew. Ben-Yehuda is credited with the invention of 4,000 new Hebrew words—related when possible to ancient ones—and the creation of the first modern Hebrew dictionary.

▼ FIGURE 5-33 ALGONQUIN Student in Chisasibi, Québec, writes in Cree, an Algonquian language.



Pause and Reflect 5.4.2

Can you think of other words that would not have existed in ancient times?

▼ FIGURE 5-34 HEBREW The road signs are in (top) Hebrew, (middle) Arabic, and English.



PRESERVING ENDANGERED LANGUAGES: CELTIC

Learning Outcome 5.4.3

Understand why the number of Celtic speakers has declined and how the languages are being preserved.

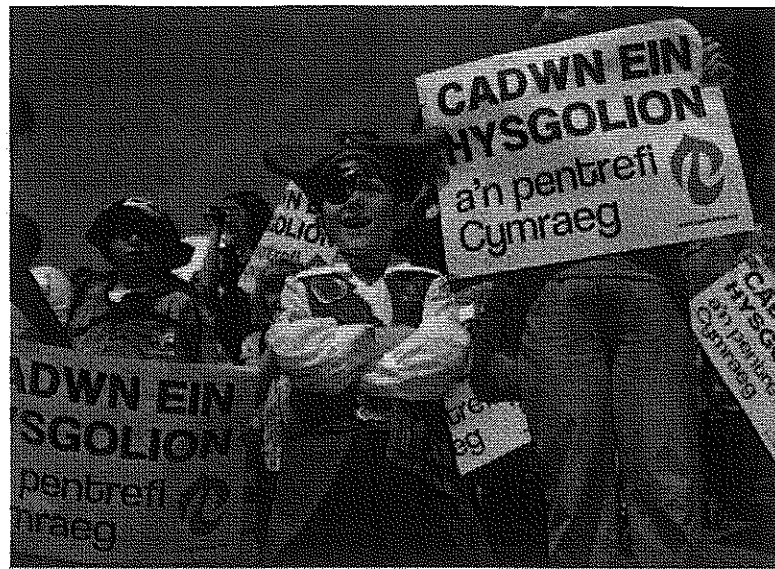
Some endangered languages are being preserved. Nonetheless, linguists expect that hundreds of languages will become extinct during the twenty-first century and that only about 300 languages are clearly safe from extinction because they have sufficient speakers and official government support.

The Celtic branch of Indo-European is of particular interest to English speakers because it was the major language in the British Isles before the Germanic Angles, Jutes, and Saxons invaded. Two thousand years ago, Celtic languages were spoken in much of present-day Germany, France, and northern Italy, as well as in the British Isles. Today, Celtic languages survive only in remote parts of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland and on the Brittany peninsula of France.

The Celtic language branch is divided into Goidelic (Gaelic) and Brythonic groups. Two Goidelic languages survive—Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic. Speakers of Brythonic (also called Cymric or Britannic) fled westward during the Germanic invasions to Wales, southwestward to Cornwall, or southward across the English Channel to the Brittany peninsula of France. Recent efforts have prevented the disappearance of Celtic languages and others in Europe. The fate of five Celtic languages is described here, in order of number of speakers.

WELSH (BRYTHONIC). Wales—the name derived from the Germanic invaders' word for *foreign*—was conquered by the English in 1283. Welsh remained dominant in Wales until the nineteenth century, when many English speakers migrated there to work in coal mines and factories. A 2004 survey found 611,000 Welsh speakers in Wales, 22 percent of the population. In some isolated communities in the northwest, especially in the county of Gwynedd, two-thirds speak Welsh.

Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (Welsh Language Society) has been instrumental in preserving the language. Britain's 1988 Education Act made Welsh language training a compulsory subject in all schools in Wales, and Welsh history and music have been added to the curriculum. All local governments and utility companies are now obliged to provide services in Welsh. Welsh-language road signs have been posted throughout Wales, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) produces Welsh-language television and radio programs (Figure 5-35). Knowledge of Welsh is now required for many jobs, especially in public service, media, culture, and sports.



▲ FIGURE 5-35 WELSH Members of the Welsh Language Society protest closure of small rural schools; the signs say "save our Welsh-speaking village schools."

IRISH. Irish Gaelic and English are the Republic of Ireland's two official languages. Irish is spoken by 350,000 people on a daily basis, and 1.5 million say that they can speak it (Figure 5-36). An Irish-language TV station began broadcasting in 1996. English road signs were banned from portions of western Ireland in 2005. The revival is being led by young Irish living in other countries who wish to distinguish themselves from the English (in much the same way that Canadians traveling abroad often make efforts to distinguish themselves from U.S. citizens). Irish singers, including many rock groups (although not U2), have begun to record and perform in Gaelic.

In the 1300s, the Irish were forbidden to speak their own language in the presence of their English masters. By the nineteenth century, Irish children were required

▼ FIGURE 5-36 IRISH The name of the pub means "the little bridge" in Irish.



to wear “tally sticks” around their necks at school. The teacher carved a notch in the stick every day the child used an Irish word, and at the end of the day meted out punishment based on the number of tallies. Parents encouraged their children to learn English so that they could compete for jobs.

Pause and Reflect 5.4.3

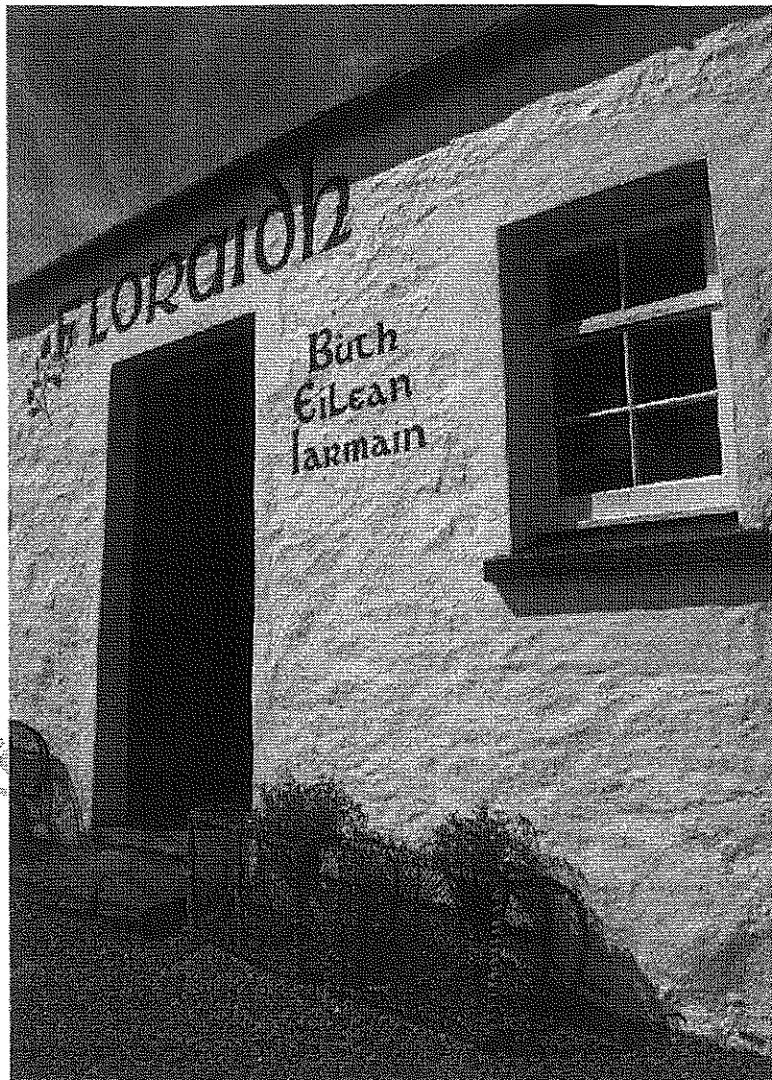
Use Google Translate to type something in English and see its translation in Irish and in Welsh. Do Irish and Welsh appear similar or very different?

BRETON. In Brittany—like Cornwall, an isolated peninsula that juts out into the Atlantic Ocean—around 250,000 people speak Breton regularly. Breton differs from the other Celtic languages in that it has more French words (Figure 5-37).

SCOTTISH. In Scotland 59,000, or 1 percent of the people, speak Scottish Gaelic (Figure 5-38). An extensive body of literature exists in Gaelic languages, including the Robert Burns poem *Auld Lang Syne* (“old long since”), the basis for the popular New Year’s Eve song. Gaelic was carried from Ireland to Scotland about 1,500 years ago.

CORNISH. Cornish became extinct in 1777, with the death of the language’s last known native speaker, Dolly Pentreath, who lived in Mousehole (pronounced “muzzle”). Before Pentreath died, an English historian wrote down as much of her speech as possible so that future generations could study the Cornish language. One of her last utterances was later translated as “I will not speak English . . . you ugly, black toad!”

▼ **FIGURE 5-37 BRETON** Sign for the town is in French and Breton. In the background is the world’s largest collections of ancient stones, which were erected more than 5,000 years ago by people who inhabited Brittany before the Celts.



▲ **FIGURE 5-38 SCOTTISH** The sign over the door says that this is a florist. Eilean Iarmain is the Scottish name for the village of Isleornsay, Scotland.

A few hundred people have become fluent in the formerly extinct Cornish language, which was revived in the 1920s. Cornish is taught in grade schools and adult evening courses and is used in some church services. Some banks accept checks written in Cornish. See the Sustainability and Inequality in Our Global Village box for more on the revival of Cornish. After years of dispute over how to spell the revived language, various groups advocating for the revival of Cornish reached an agreement in 2008 on a standard written version of the language. Because the language became extinct, it is impossible to know precisely how to pronounce Cornish words.

The long-term decline of languages such as Celtic provides an excellent example of the precarious struggle for survival that many languages experience. Faced with the diffusion of alternatives used by people with greater political and economic strength, speakers of Celtic and other languages must work hard to preserve their linguistic cultural identity.

PRESERVING ABORIGINAL AND MAORI IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

English is the most widely used language in Australia and New Zealand as a result of British colonization during the early nineteenth century. Settlers in Australia and New Zealand established and maintained outposts of British culture, including use of the English language.

Though English remains the dominant language of Australia and New Zealand, the languages that predate British settlement survive in both countries. However, the two countries have adopted different policies with regard to preserving indigenous languages. Australia regards English as a tool for promoting cultural diversity, whereas New Zealand regards linguistic diversity as an important element of cultural diversity.

AUSTRALIA. In Australia, 1 percent of the population is Aboriginal. Many elements of Aboriginal culture are now being preserved. But education is oriented toward teaching English rather than maintaining local languages. English is the language of instruction throughout Australia, and others are relegated to the status of second language.

An essential element in maintaining British culture was restriction of immigration from non-English-speaking places during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fear of immigration was especially strong in Australia because of its proximity to other Asian countries. Under a "White Australia" policy, every prospective immigrant was required to write 50 words of a European language dictated by an immigration officer. The dictation test was not eliminated until 1957. The Australian government now merely requires that immigrants learn English.

NEW ZEALAND. In New Zealand, more than 10 percent of the population is Maori, descendants of Polynesian people who migrated there around 1,000 years ago (Figure 5-39). In contrast with Australia, New Zealand has adopted policies to

preserve the Maori language. Most notably, Maori has become one of New Zealand's three official languages, along with English and sign language. A Maori Language Commission was established to preserve the language. Despite official policies, only 1 percent of New Zealanders are fluent in Maori, most of whom are over age 50. Preserving the language requires skilled teachers and the willingness to endure inconvenience compared to using the world's lingua franca, English.

On the other hand, New Zealand's language requirement for immigrants is more stringent than Australia's: In most circumstances, immigrants must already be fluent in English, although free English lessons are available to immigrants for the exceptions. More remote from Asian landmasses, New Zealand has attracted fewer Asian immigrants.

Pause and Reflect 5.4.6

Which language policy do you favor, Australia's or New Zealand's? Why?

PRESERVING OCCITAN IN FRANCE

The most important linguistic difference within France is between the north and the south (refer to Figure 5-13). In the north, the most commonly spoken language is what is now known as French. The standard form of French derives from Francien, which was once a dialect of the Île-de-France region of the country.

Francien became the standard form of French because the region included Paris, which became the capital and largest city of France. Francien French became the country's official language in the sixteenth century, and local dialects tended to disappear as a result of the capital's long-time dominance over French political, economic, and social life.

Occitan is spoken by about 2 million people in southern France and adjacent countries. The name derives from the French region of Aquitaine, which in French has a similar



▲ **FIGURE 5-39 MAORI LANGUAGE, NEW ZEALAND** The sign, in Maori, is the name of this place, and is said to be the world's second-longest place name, at 85 letters. The Maori translates as "the summit where Tamatea, the man with the big knees, the climber of mountains, the land-swallower who travelled about, played his nose flute to his loved one."