

# Chapter

# 5 Languages



Why did someone spread graffiti on this sign? Page 163.



Why is this sign in four languages – but not English? Page 165.

## KEY ISSUE 1

Where Are Languages Distributed?

PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE PIGEONS  
請勿餵白鴿  
POR FAVOR NO DE COMIDA A LAS PALOMAS

### A World of Languages p. 143

Languages are like leaves growing from language families and branches.

## KEY ISSUE 2

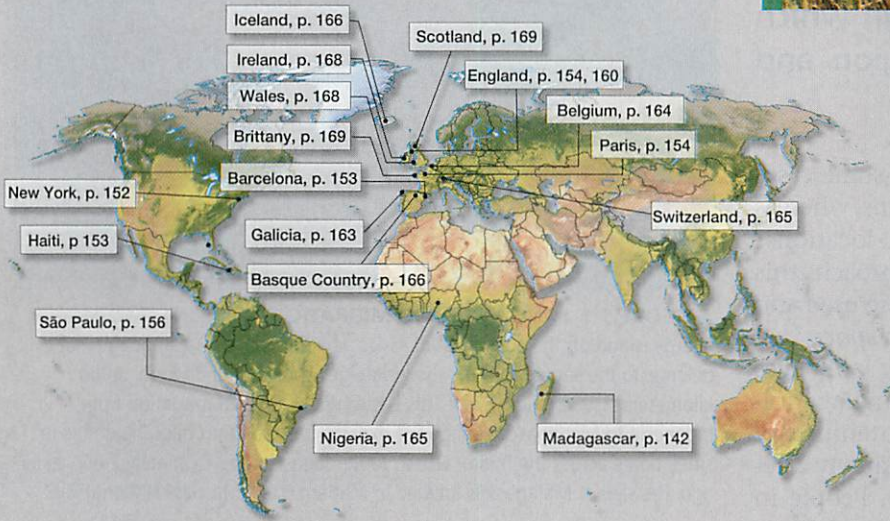
Why Is English Related to Other Languages?



### Languages Are Families p. 150

Most languages can be classified into a handful of families.





▲ No fishing in Israel's Alexander River. Can you identify the other three languages on the sign? Can you read any of them? Two-thirds of Americans believe that it is important to learn a second language, but only about one-fourth of Americans can hold a conversation in a second language.

### KEY ISSUE 3

#### Why Do Individual Languages Vary among Places?



#### It Doesn't Sound Like English p. 158

The English language can sound very different in the United Kingdom than in the United States. Patterns of migration explain differences.

### KEY ISSUE 4

#### Why Do People Preserve Local Languages?



#### What Does This Say? p. 164

Many languages have disappeared, meaning that no one who speaks them is alive today. But some, like Welsh, are being preserved.



# Introducing Languages

Language is an important part of culture, which, as shown in Chapter 1, has two main meanings—people’s values and their tangible artifacts. Chapter 4 looked at the material objects of culture. This chapter and the next two discuss three traits that distinguish cultural values—language, religion, and ethnicity. We start our study of the geographic elements of cultural values with language in part because it is the means through which other cultural values, such as religion and ethnicity, are communicated.

Where are different languages spoken? Why in some cases are two different languages spoken in two locations, whereas in other cases the same language is spoken in two locations? Consistent with this book’s where and why approach, this chapter first looks at where different languages are used and how these languages can be logically grouped in *space*.

The second and third sections examine why languages have distinctive distributions. The study of language follows logically from migration because the contemporary distribution of languages around the world is largely a result of past migrations of peoples (Figure 5-1). People in two locations speak the same language because of migration from one of the locations to another. If the two groups have few *connections* with each other after the migration, the languages spoken by the two groups will begin to differ. After a long period without contact, the two groups will speak languages that are so different, they are classified as separate languages. The interplay between interaction and isolation helps explain the distribution of *regions* of individual languages and entire language families.

Language is like luggage: People carry it with them when they move from place to place. They incorporate new words into their own language when they reach new *places*, and they contribute words brought with them to the existing language at the new location. Geographers look at the similarities among languages to understand the diffusion and interaction of people around the world.

The final section of this chapter discusses contradictory trends of *scale* in language. On the one hand, English has achieved an unprecedented globalization because people around the world are learning it to participate in a global economy and culture. On the other hand, people are trying to preserve local diversity in language because language is one of the basic elements of cultural identity and a major feature of a region’s uniqueness. Language is a



▲ FIGURE 5-1 LANGUAGE AND MIGRATION The people of Madagascar, a large island off the east coast of Africa, speak Malagasy, a language that belongs to the same family as the languages spoken in Indonesia, 3,000 kilometers (1,900 miles) away. This is strong evidence of migration from Indonesia to Madagascar. Language experts conclude that migrants sailed in small boats across the Indian Ocean to Madagascar approximately 2,000 years ago. The sign in Malagasy is located in Madagascar’s Masoala National Park.

source of pride to a people, a symbol of cultural unity. As a culture develops, language is both a cause of that development and a consequence.

- **KEY ISSUE 1** describes *where* languages are distributed around the world. The languages spoken by most of the world’s population can be grouped into a handful of families. These families have distinctive distributions.
- **KEY ISSUE 2** discusses the distribution of languages in the Indo-European family. Indo-European languages are used by nearly one-half of the world’s population, and Indo-European is the family to which English belongs.
- **KEY ISSUE 3** looks at the geographic differences within individual languages. The distribution of multiple dialects of a particular language is an example of *local diversity* of cultural traits.
- **KEY ISSUE 4** explains *why* English has become the most important language for communications in a world of *globalization* of culture and economy. At the same time, some countries are preserving and protecting a local diversity of languages.