

What foreign languages do differently

Languages are not only a means of communication but they also always reflect people's social and cultural experiences too. Every language is an essential part of human identity and a unique storehouse of knowledge with its own metaphors, writing system, sounds, grammar and vocabulary. This exhibition focuses on the fascinating variety of languages around the globe. How does water sound? Where is the future? What is a word? The wide range of possibilities open to human expressivity is a motivation to gain a differentiated perspective on the universal validity of our concepts and ideas. Access to visual, acoustic, and tactile information in eight interactive displays makes exploring the topic of language into a sensory experience.

The exhibition is curated by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities (BBAW) in cooperation with the Society for Endangered Languages (GBS) based on a concept by Clara Maria Henze within the framework of the BBAW Topic of the Year 2017|18 "Language".
Distribution of languages in the world by number of native speakers

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From Tariana in Brazil to Tuvan in Siberia: It is estimated that about 7,000 languages exist worldwide today, and every year there are fewer. More than half of them could become extinct by the end of the 21st century. The reasons for this dramatic disappearance of languages lie in the persecution or repression of minority groups in many parts of the world as well as in the rapid progression towards the global equalisation of living conditions.

Today, about one half of the world's population speaks one of the 15 most-spoken languages. The other half speaks one of the 7,000 other native languages, mostly in small indigenous language communities. In almost every place where it was traditional for people to be multilingual, increasingly, only one national or regional language is now used.

1. IS THAT A WORD?

Sentence words

Language: CAYUGA (Ontario, Kanada/ Canada)

Number of speakers: < 50

In the North American indigenous language CAYUGA it is normal to form very complex words. Such a word can often only be translated into a whole sentence in English or German. A central element, mostly the verb, is combined with numerous other elements that carry meaning. In this way, a very long word is created. This type of language is called a *polysynthetic* language (Gr. *poly* = many, multiform + Gr. *synthesis* = composition, put together).

Sae'ahtraniōtako'

again-one time-she-basket-hang-did process backwards

“She put the basket (that was hanging up) down again.”

Language: DALABON (Arnhem Land, Australien/ Australia)

Number of speakers: < 10

DALABON is a polysynthetic language that can convey highly complex information in a single “sentence word”. It is spoken in Australia by just a handful of people.

A language always expresses social relations within a community as well, such as kinship or clan membership. Compared to English or German, completely different social categories play a role in DALABON: Is the person who is being talked about a person who commands respect? Who knows something about what is being said? How many people are involved and how are they related? How will what is said be evaluated? All these social dimensions of experience are incorporated into the construction of a single word in DALABON. Polysynthetic features are also found in other languages, for example, in Siberia and in the Caucasus.

Wekemarnûmolkkûnhdokan

1. What is happening? Someone is leaving or coming. Here the polite form of the verb “leave/come” is used because you are talking about your mother-in-law.
2. Who knows about it? At least one person (who is possibly affected by the event) does not know about it.
3. How do you estimate the consequences? The outcome may be to someone’s advantage/disadvantage.
4. How many people are you talking about and how are they related to each other? Two people with the kinship relation mother/daughter (or uncle/nephew, great-grandmother/great-grandchild, etc.).
5. How do you feel about it? The anxiety prefix indicates that the situation is undesirable.

“The two (relatives such as mother/daughter, great-grandmother/great-grandchild), I am afraid, are leaving with (good or bad) consequences for someone who we do not know (at least for one person who could be affected by this incident) (expressed in the polite form of address because my mother-in-law is one of the people involved).”

2. WHERE IS THE FUTURE?

Metaphorical model of time

Language: AYMARA (Peru, Bolivien, Chile)

Number of speakers: <1,5 Mio.

In most of the world's languages, the future lies in front of the speaker and the past lies behind her/him when s/he is talking figuratively about time. That is how it is in English and German too. However, in the AYMARA language, this metaphorical model of time is inverted. The Aymara word for “to see” (*nayra*), which also means “eye” and “in front”, is used in many expressions that refer to the past.

nayra – eye, sight, in front

nayra mara – (lit. in-front year) last year

ancha nayra pachana – (lit. at the in-front time) a long time ago

Things that have already been experienced or seen lie in the past. But the physical eye looks in the direction forwards. That is why an AYMARA speaker imagines the past as lying in *front* of her/him. Conversely, the future lies unseen *behind* her/him. Therefore, the word for “back” or “behind” (*qhipa*) is used for expressions that refer to the future.

qhipa – back, behind

qhipuru – (lit. behind day) a day in the future

akata qhiparu – (lit. a day backwards from here) from now onwards

nayra pacha – (lit. in-front time) past time

qhipa pacha – (lit. behind time) future time

3. HOW DO YOU COUNT?

Body-part counting system

Language: OKSAPMIN (Papua New Guinea)

Number of speakers: <8.000

OKSAPMIN is a language spoken in Papua New

Guinea by about 8,000 people. A particular feature of OKSAPMIN and other languages in the region is that body parts are used to count.

In 14 steps, one counts from the thumb (1) to the nose (14) and back, in 13 steps, to the little finger of the hand (27) on the other side of the body. Finally, the fists are traditionally raised in the air and *tit fu!* ("one complete round") is exclaimed. The connection between numbers and body parts is also used in everyday language. Hence, "then he did not come home for eight nights" is expressed as *j ex eamunxe dik jox napingoplio*, literally "then elbow time came [he] not home".

Even today, children learn OKSAPMIN alongside the country's common languages Tok Pisin and English. However, the 27-body-part counting system is used less and less, and predominantly by older speakers.

1. Tipəna – Thumb
2. Tipnarip – Index finger
3. Bumrip – Middle finger
4. Hətdip – Ring finger
5. Hətbəta – Little finger
6. Dopa – Wrist
7. Besa – Forearm
8. Kir – Inner elbow
9. Towət – Biceps
10. Kata – Shoulder
11. Gwer – Neck
12. Nata – Ear
13. Kina – Eye
14. Aruma – Nose
15. Tan-kina – Eye
16. Tan-nata – Ear
17. Tan-gwer – Neck
18. Tan-kata – Shoulder
19. Tan-towət – Biceps
20. Tan-kir – Inner elbow
21. Tan-besa – Forearm
22. Tan-dopa – Wrist
23. Tan-tipəna – Thumb
24. Tan-tipnarip – Index finger
25. Tan-bumrip – Middle finger
26. Tan-hətdip – Ring finger
27. Tan-təthəta – Little finger

Oksapmin elder displaying the 27-body-part counting system

Video by Geoffrey Saxe, June 2001. Available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 license. More on mathematics in OKSAPMIN at www.culturecognition.com. Funding for the 2001 fieldwork in Oksapmin communities provided by a grant from The Spencer Foundation (200100026).

4. HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?

Source of information

Language: TARIANA (Brazil)

Number of speakers: <100

Sometimes, not just because of the prevalence of fake news, it would be desirable to know where a piece of information comes from: Did the speaker see something her/himself or does s/he know about it only from hearsay? In over half the world's languages, the source of a statement is referred to by means of grammatical labels. In linguistics, this labelling is called *evidentiality* (Lat. *evidens* = obvious, apparent). TARIANA, which is spoken by an indigenous people of the same name, is such a language.

By using different word endings, speakers of TARIANA differentiate between whether they are talking about their own experiences or about what other people have told them. For this reason, they find other languages very imprecise.

tʃinu niwhāka dina

– The dog bit the man.

(The speaker saw how the dog bit the man.)

tʃinu niwhāmahka dina

– The dog bit the man.

(The speaker heard the cries of the man who was bitten.)

tʃinu niwhāsika dina

– The dog bit the man.

(The man showed the speaker his bleeding wound and the bite marks.)

tʃinu niwhāpidaka dina

– The dog bit the man.

(The speaker was told that the man had been bitten.)

5. HOW DOES WATER SOUND?

The mirroring of sound

Language: TUVAN (Siberia, Russland)

Number of speakers: <250.000

TUVAN is a Turkic language spoken in Southern Siberia, Western Mongolia and China. Tuvan people appear to have a heightened sensitivity to sounds and noises because TUVAN possesses a rich vocabulary for describing and imitating natural noises.

Other languages, too, contain such words whose sound mirrors their sense, so-called *onomatopoeic* words (Ancient Gr. *onoma*: "name" + Ancient Gr. *poiēsis*: "creation", "making"). What is special about TUVAN, though, is that new terms for (natural) noises are constantly being invented by creating different combinations of letters, and these are understood immediately.

6. HOW DO YOU READ THAT?

Code script

Language: MAKASSAR, Script: Lontara (Indonesia)

Number of speakers: <2,1 Mio.

On the island of Sulawesi, MAKASSAR is a language spoken by a relatively large number of people but written by only a few. The script in which MAKASSAR is written is also called LONTARA because it is traditionally written on leaves of the lontar palm.

It functions like a code. Each syllable, for example, "ka", may have three different endings. These are not written down but added by the reader. The number of possible combinations, and hence interpretations, increases with every written character that is added. The Makassar say that the script becomes Makassarese only when a text is spoken out loud. The key to decoding the script is passed on from generation to

generation by oral tradition alone. As young Makassar people mostly read and write in Indonesian, less and less people can read the old Makassarese texts.

KA 3 possible syllable endings

KA KA 9 possible syllable endings

BA LA DA TO KA 243 possible syllable endings

balanda tokka
„the crazy Dutchman“

balla datoka
„the Chinese temple“

This decorative composition is an artistic arrangement of LONTARA script characters.

7. WHERE IS NORTH?

Orientation in sprace

Language: KAYARDILD
Number of speakers: <5

“The window is situated on your left.” – This statement serves spatial orientation and is based on the position of the speaker in English or German.

In other languages, for example, KAYARDILD, which is spoken in Queensland, Northern Australia, the perception of space is based on other principles. Spatial orientation is achieved in KAYARDILD not by reference to the human body and directions like “up”, “down”, “right” and “left”. The cardinal directions constitute an absolute frame of spatial reference and permeate everyday language: “Move the western pan a bit more to the south”, is therefore something that could be said at lunchtime. The perception of space is thus influenced by the language and culture in which someone grows up.

Game instructions

1. Player 1 arranges the game pieces as s/he wishes.
2. Player 1 then explains to player 2 exactly how the game pieces are arranged. On the basis of the

description, player 2 tries to position her/his own pieces in exactly the same arrangement.

3. Descriptions of directions such as "left" and "right", "up", "down" or "above" and "below" are not allowed.

The arrangement may be explained using only the cardinal directions.

4. After one round, the players change roles.

Variation 1: To make it more difficult, the players do not use the compass.

Variation 2: After one round, the players change places and so change their positions relative to the cardinal directions.

8. HOW DO YOU SUMMARISE IT?

Bundles of experience

Language: DALABON (Arnhem Land, Australia)

Number of speakers: < 10

Language: YAHPAN (Tierra del Fuego, Chile)

Number of speakers: 1

Language: KET (Siberia, Russia)

Number of speakers: < 1.300

Language: RAPA NUI (Easter Islands, Chile)

Number of speakers: < 3.000

Language: COOK ISLANDS MAORI (Cooks Islands, New Zealand)

Number of speakers: < 14.000

Fernweh (desire to go away to a distant place), *Weltschmerz* (melancholic feeling of world-weariness)

and *Schadenfreude* (pleasure derived from someone else's misfortune) – in German there are many words for which no direct translation and equivalent in other languages exist. They are often associated with feelings. Furthermore, they are based on experiences and values that are accessible only through precise knowledge of the (native) language and culture. Not just in German but also in many other languages, there are words like these that summarise larger and smaller bundles of experience in one word.

Fernweh, Weltschmerz, Schadenfreude

– Do you know other foreign words that are used in your language?

átətlŋō:ks

(approximately: “atätlongooks” with rising-falling tonal accent on the first two syllables and a high tone on the long /oo/)

A single tree in the middle of a group of trees of a different kind.

Ket (Sibirien, Russland/ Siberia, Russia)

< 1.300 Sprecher/ Speaker

Tingo

The action of appropriating desired objects from a friend’s house by borrowing them all, one after the other, and never giving them back.

RAPA NUI (Osterinseln, Chile/ Easter Islands, Chile)

< 3.000 Sprecher/ Speakers

Papakata

When one leg is shorter than the other leg.

COOK ISLANDS MAORI (Cook Islands, New Zealand)

< 14.000 Speakers

Karddulunghno

The smell of rain and earth at the beginning of the rainy season.

DALABON (Arnhem Land, Australia)

< 10 Speakers

Mamiklapinatapei

The wordless or meaningful glance exchanged between two people, each of whom would really like to take the initiative but is too shy to dare to make the first move.

YAGHAN (Tierra del Fuego, Chile)

1 Speaker

Society for Endangered Languages

The Society for Endangered Languages aims to promote the use, preservation and documentation of endangered languages and dialects. On the one hand, it supports projects concerned with the documentation of not-yet-described languages in sound, images and writing, or with the collation of text editions, dictionaries and teaching materials. On the other hand,

it promotes initiatives that aim to maintain multilingualism. Since the society's foundation in 1998, over 70 such projects throughout the world have already been able to receive funding through membership subscriptions and generous donations.