



The languages of the world

How many languages are there? Around 6,000. Maybe quite a few more. Maybe quite a few less. It's difficult to be sure.

One reason is that languages are rapidly dying out, in several parts of the world – perhaps as fast as one every few weeks. We'll see in a later chapter why this is happening. But obviously, when languages are disappearing at such a rate, it makes it difficult to arrive at a definite total.

Then there are still a few parts of the world where people are discovering *new* languages. It can happen like this. An expedition travels to an isolated valley in the middle of the forests of Papua New Guinea and finds a small community living there. When they try to talk to the people, they realize that the language isn't like any of the others in the region. The world total of languages goes up by one.

Or this happens. Linguists finally get the chance to investigate the speech of a community living in a coastal village in Indonesia. They assume that the way the people of this village speak is going to be like the way other people speak who live in villages further along the coast – a bit different, perhaps, but not seriously so. In other words, they think the people will just be speaking different dialects of the same language – in much the same way as we find different dialects of English as we move along the coast from Yorkshire to

Lincolnshire. But when the linguists start their study, they discover that the people in the new village speak a totally different language – as different, perhaps, as English is from French or German. It's a big surprise, and the result is that the world total again goes up by one.

This problem of deciding whether a group of people are speaking a *dialect* or a *language* turns up all the time. What's the essential difference between the two? Think it out by exploring the following situation.

There are four men in a room. One is from Liverpool, one is from London, one is from Paris, and one is from Bordeaux. Each speaks only the language of the place where he was brought up. Which of them will be able to understand each other?

The man from Liverpool and the man from London don't speak in exactly the same way, but they'll be able to understand each other most of the time. They'll both say they speak 'English'. And the man from Paris and the man from Bordeaux don't speak in exactly the same way either, but they'll also be able to understand each other most of the time. They'll both say they speak 'French'.

The man from Liverpool and the man from London are speaking different dialects of English. The man from Paris and the man from Bordeaux are speaking different dialects of French. When people speak different dialects, they mostly understand each other.

The two Englishmen will say: 'I don't understand what those other two are saying because I don't speak French.' And the two Frenchmen will say: 'I don't understand what those other two are saying because I don't speak English.' In other words, they realize they're speaking different languages. When people speak different languages, they don't understand each other.

So that's the essential difference between a dialect and a language. A language is made up of many dialects, and the people who speak those dialects generally understand each other (even if they do have the occasional difficulty with local accents or words). Nobody knows just how many dialects there are in the world – at least 20,000, I would say. But they group themselves into about 6,000 languages. We can talk about a family of dialects forming a language. And the

story doesn't stop there. Languages form families too.

How can we tell that a group of people belong to the same family? The best evidence is if they look or sound like each other. They've all got big noses or red hair, or they all have deep voices. We can tell that languages belong to the same family in the same sort of way. They look or sound like each other. They have similar sounds, or words, or grammar.

Here's an example. What is the word for 'father' in Spanish? It is 'padre', pronounced something like 'pah-dray'. What is the word for 'father' in Italian? Also 'padre', but with a slightly different pronunciation. What is it in Portuguese? 'Pai', pronounced roughly like 'pie' in English. And in French? 'Père', pronounced roughly like 'pear' in English.

We can see more variations when we explore the dialects of a country. If we travel down through Italy, we'll hear several other versions. In Veneto we'll hear 'pare' (pronounced 'pa-ray'); in Milan, it'll be 'pader' (pronounced 'pa-dare'); in Naples it's 'pate' (pronounced 'pa-tay'); and in Sicily 'patri' (pronounced 'pa-tree').

It's easy to see a pattern. All the words begin with a [p] sound. Most of them have a [t] or a [d] in the middle. Most of them have a [r]. And almost all of them have an [a] in the first part and an [e] in the second.

When we see this kind of similarity, we can draw the obvious conclusion. All these words must have a common origin. Once upon a time, there must have been a word – let's think of it as 'pater' – spoken by a group of people. These people then started to move around Europe, and as they did so their speech gradually changed. They developed new pronunciations – new accents, as we called them in Chapter 12. The people who went into Spain changed the [t] into a [d] and altered the order of the sounds, so that [er] became [re]. The people who went into France dropped the [t] altogether, and joined the [a] and [e] into a single long sound, which is written today with an <è> letter.

And this is exactly what happened. We can be definite, for this example, because we know what the historical facts are. There *was* an original word, 'pater'. It was in the Latin language, spoken by

the Romans. And we know that the Romans had an empire, and travelled all over western Europe, taking their Latin language with them. Eventually, ordinary people in France, Spain, and other places started to use the word, and changed it in the ways we've seen. The same thing happened to all the other words in Latin. And Latin grammar changed too. The result is the modern languages spoken in these places.

It took several hundred years for all this to happen. Languages change very slowly. But once they do, we end up with a family of languages. Linguists have given a name to the family – in this case, the *Romance* family. And we talk about the *parent* language (Latin) and the *daughter* languages (French, Spanish, Italian, and so on). We also say that French and Spanish and Italian are *sister* languages. It really is a family. And in all, when we include all the local languages and major dialects in France, Spain, and Italy, it's a family that has over 30 members.

All the languages of the world – all 6,000 or so – can be grouped into families like this. The problem is that in many parts of the world there are no historical facts to help us. If we find that some languages in the middle of Africa have similar words, we can draw the same conclusions – but we're often guessing, because we don't know anything about the history of the peoples, or how their languages developed.

In Europe, we're in a very fortunate position, because there are written records for most countries which go back over a thousand years, so we can actually see how the languages have changed over the centuries. Everywhere we notice the same sort of changes in sounds that we saw in the case of the Romance family – a [t] becoming a [d], or an [a] becoming an [e], or the other way round.

The changes always make sense, when we think of how we make sounds. As we saw in Chapter 4, it doesn't take much to change a [t] into a [d]. All we have to do is start the vocal cords vibrating. Nor would it take much to change a [p] into a [f], because these sounds are made in a very similar way. We use two lips to make [p], and we put the bottom lip against the top teeth to make [f].

Then, instead of holding the two lips tightly together, as for [p], we relax the lip a bit and let the air rush through, which produces an [f]. That change from [p] to [f] actually happened in the history of English, as we'll see in a moment.

While the Romans were taking Latin around west and south-west Europe, other groups of people were taking their languages around northern Europe, and changes were taking place there too. In particular, the Germanic people were on the move. They originally lived in the south of Scandinavia, especially in the area where southern Sweden and Denmark are today. Sometime around 1000 BC they started to move south, into central Europe and along the north European coast. Over a thousand years later, some of them arrived in Britain.

As the Germanic people spread around Europe, so their language changed – just as happened in the south with Romance. Today, we call the earliest language of the Germanic people of Scandinavia *Old Norse*. The language of the Germanic people who went into Germany is called *Old High German*. The language of those who went into the north European coast is *Old Frisian*. The language of those who came to Britain is *Old English*.

These people would not have been able to understand the Romans speaking Latin, nor would the Romans have understood the Germanic languages. But when we look at some of the earliest words to be written down in these languages, we find some striking similarities to the words found in Latin. If we look at early documents in Old English, around AD 800, we will find the word for 'father'. It's written 'feder' or 'fæder' (the <æ> was a way of writing an [a] sound). In Old High German it's 'fater'. In Old Frisian it's 'fadar' or 'feder'. The words have changed a bit today, but we can still see the similarities: modern English 'father', modern German 'Vater' (the word is spelled with a capital letter in German), modern Dutch 'vader'.

Obviously this is another family: the *Germanic* family of languages. And as we look around other parts of Europe, we'll find several other families. Welsh, Gaelic, Breton, and a few other languages form a *Celtic* family of languages. Russian, Polish,

Czech, and several others form a *Slavic* family. And there are some languages which, as it were, never had children. Greek stands all alone, as do the languages of Armenia and Albania.

For a long time, linguists studied languages by looking at small groups in this way. Then in 1785, Sir William Jones, a judge working in India, made a remarkable suggestion. He was a true multilingual, familiar with over 40 languages, speaking several of them fluently. But he didn't just speak them; he also thought about them. And he noticed the similarities between them. Eventually he proposed that actually many of these languages might belong to the same family – even though they were spoken by people living thousands of miles apart from each other.

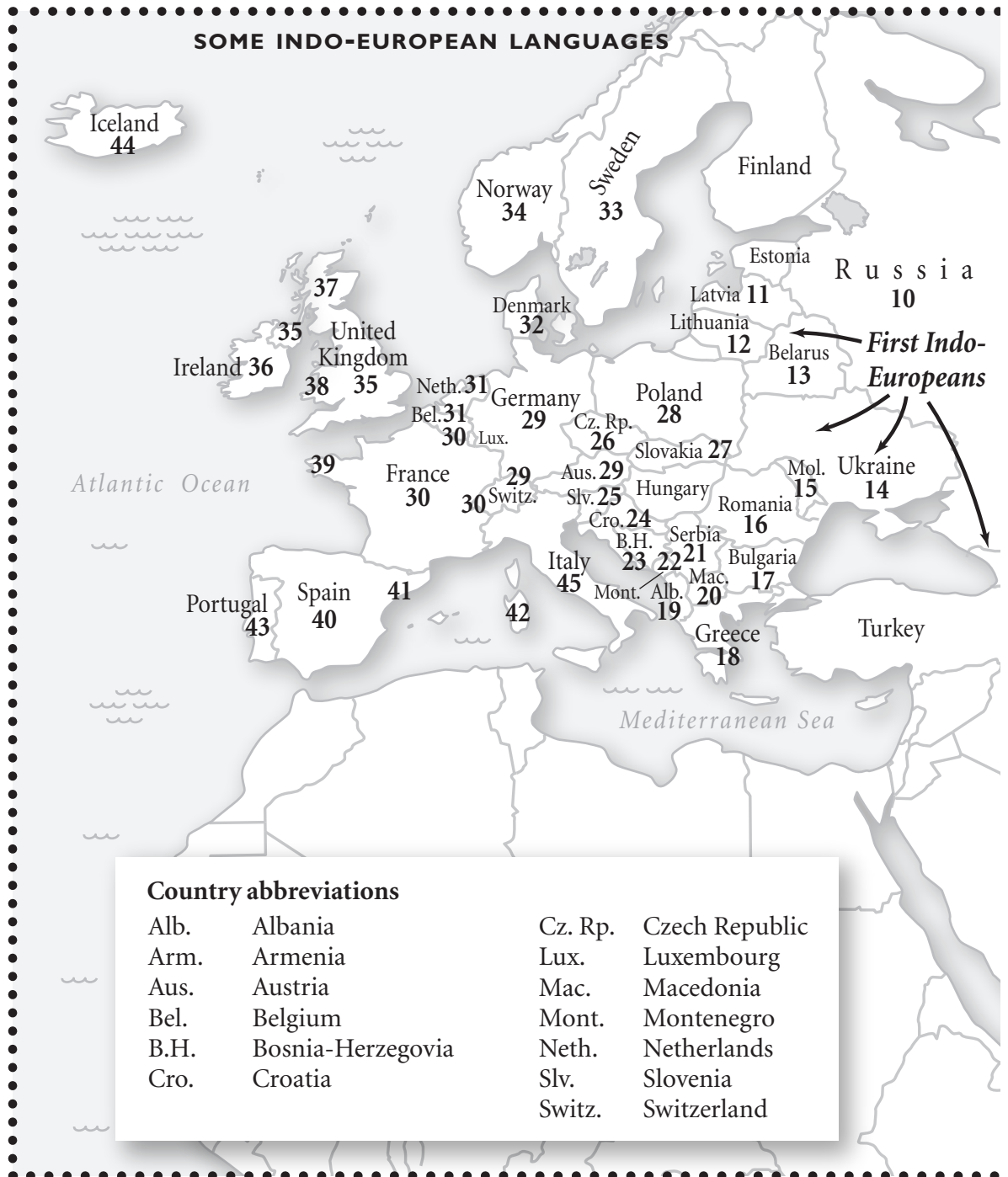
He looked at the languages of India, especially one called Sanskrit. He looked at Greek and Latin. He looked at Persian, the Celtic languages, and others. And he concluded that the similarities were so great that they couldn't possibly have been produced by accident. Surely, he said, they all come from an ancient parent language, which perhaps no longer exists?

He was right. This ancient language we now call *Indo-European*. Nobody knows exactly where the Indo-European people lived. Some think it was in the steppe lands of southern Russia; some think it was further south, nearer to Turkey; and various other locations have been suggested. Nor is anybody certain about when exactly the Indo-Europeans were on the move. It might have been around 3000 BC, but could have been a lot earlier. Still, wherever and whenever they started, they eventually travelled east into India and west into Europe. And their language changed dramatically along the way.

Whatever the Indo-European word for 'father' was, it's clear that one group of people ended up in Italy, where the language became Latin, and the word for 'father' became 'pater'. Another group ended up in Scandinavia, where the language became Germanic, and the word for 'father' became 'fater'. Another group ended up in India, where the word for father (in Sanskrit) became 'piter'. Another group ended up in Ireland, where the word for father became 'athir'. By comparing all these, linguists have worked out

that the original word was probably something like *pəter. The [ə] is a special symbol representing a sound like the 'e' of 'the'. And the asterisk is there to show that we're guessing!

We have to do a lot of guessing when we look at the languages of the world. Did all the aboriginal languages of Australia come



from a single source? Did all the languages of North America? There are 2,000 languages in Africa. They couldn't possibly have all come from a single original language – or could they? These are fascinating questions. And of course they lead to the most fascinating question of all: could all languages have come from just one original language?

