

Geography and the Languages of the World

Lesson outline

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Jorge Lopez – a representative of the young generation of Chontals. © DoBeS

Task 1

Background (for the teacher)

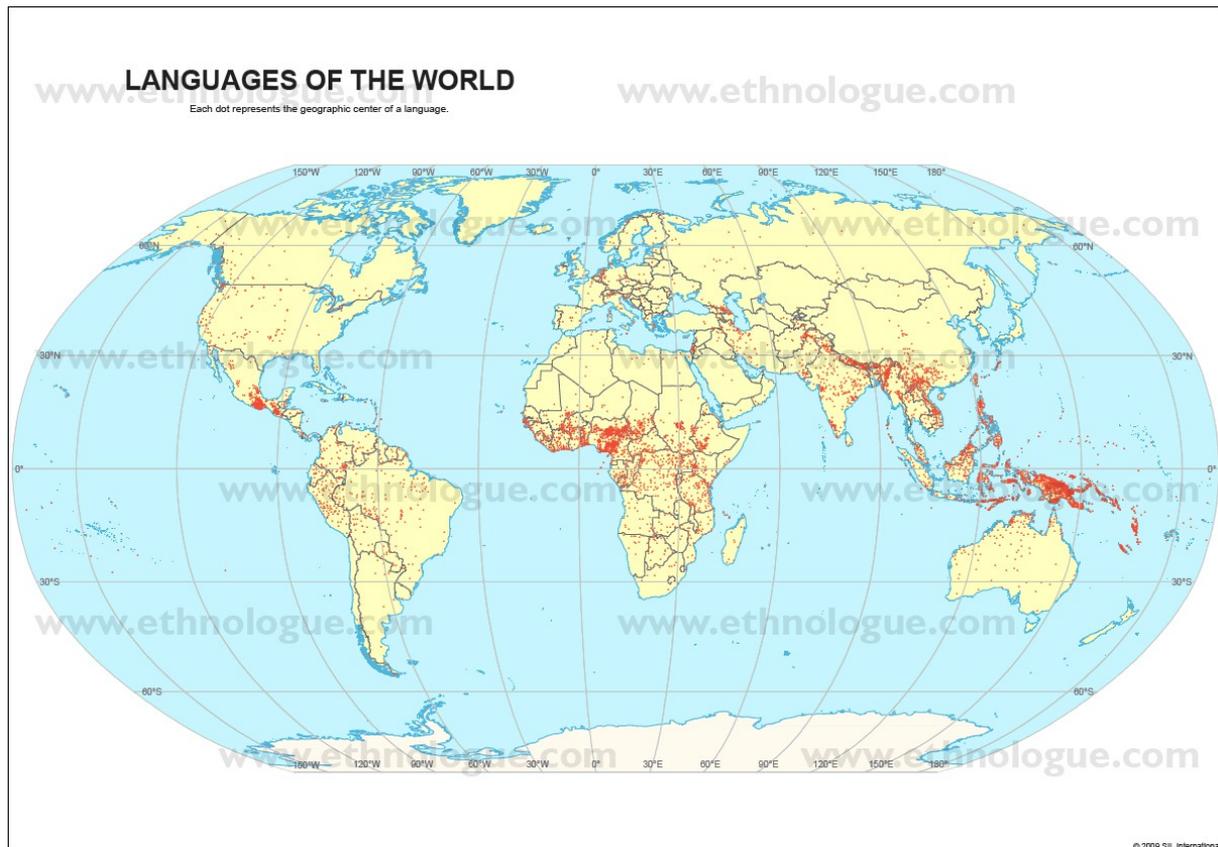
Geographic and natural factors can influence the location of languages in the world substantially. In the regions where the soil is fertile and the density of precipitation and climatic conditions are suitable for soil cultivation, the soil produces crop yields even several times throughout the year. Due to this, people do not require much living space – one family needs only a small piece of ground. In densely populated regions of the world, there is a substantial concentration of many ethnic groups in a relatively small area. Until recently, there was no interaction between various societies and they developed independently. Each one of them created its own culture and for this reason we can encounter numerous ethnolinguistic societies in small areas, for example in Western Africa or North-east Asia.

Contacts between different linguistic communities may be limited by natural geographic barriers, such as mountains or the sea. The island state of Vanuatu in the Pacific Ocean displays the biggest concentration of languages in the world – on less than 13 thousand square kilometres, 25 thousand inhabitants of this country use as many as 106 languages. In Papua New Guinea, there are 841 languages. Various mountain ranges run through this country and some regions can only be reached by helicopter. Mountains are a typical refuge for many ethnic groups. A typical situation for countries with mountain ranges is that the language of the central authority has the strongest position on plains, whereas it does not have such a vast range in the mountains. Mountainous terrain is a factor that sustains linguistic diversity in countries like Georgia or Peru.

Note! Usually, there are multiple environmental factors that influence the number of languages in a given region. Patagonia and the North American Cordillera are mountainous regions, situated in relatively unfavourable climatic zones, and as a result there are fewer languages than for example in the South Himalayas in North-east India, where precipitation occurs more often and the soil is more fertile. If it's not mentioned in the discussion during task 1, the teacher may direct students to this topic in task 2.

Assignment (for the student)

Look closely at the map picturing the placement of the languages of the world



Map 1. Location of the languages of the world. Source: www.ethnologue.org

- A. Where is the greatest number of languages?
- B. What geographical factors may cause the uneven location of languages in the world?

Task 2

Background (for the teacher)

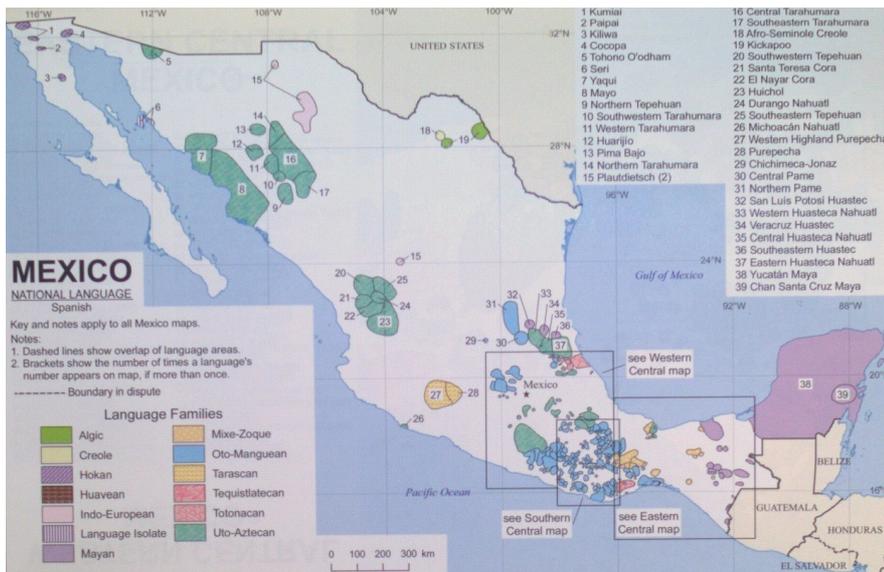
Above all, it is worth mentioning that some of the indigenous languages of Mexico died out in previous decades. As a simplification one can assume that communities that had the closest contact with Spanish settlers and their offspring lost their languages earlier. In places where a central authority did not have substantial influence, languages had a greater chance for survival. The intensity of the contacts of indigenous inhabitants of Mexico with colonists depended on geographical conditions – in less accessible mountainous regions it was less intensive than in the lowlands by the sea.

Mexico is a good example of the mixture of factors that influence linguistic diversity. The largest density of languages occurs in the south of the country: it is a naturally multilingual region, although the mountains in this region are not very high. In the highest part of the mountains the conditions are not suitable for living. Moderately high mountains, tropical climate and low accessibility to water seem to be proper conditions for the maintenance of linguistic diversity.

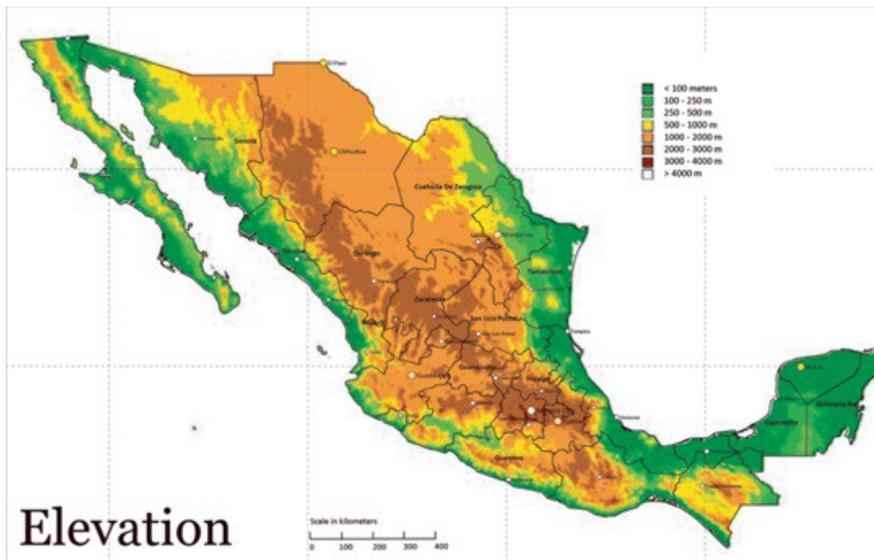
Density of languages is much larger in South Mexico than in the desert in the North of the country, although even there, one can encounter regions that are linguistically diverse – those are mostly the regions by the sea.

Assignment (for the student)

Compare the map of Mexico with the map picturing the number of languages spoken in certain regions of the country. What may be the possible correlation between geographical and natural factors and the location of languages in Mexico?



Map 2. Location of languages in Mexico. Source: Lewis (2009)



Map 3. Topographic map of Mexico. Source: www.diva-gis.org

Task 3

Background (for the teacher)

Multilingualism is natural in most countries of the world, including Mexico. Many societies of the indigenous inhabitants of the country have their own languages, but in addition they use Spanish or local languages that have a wider range. This enables them to communicate with others. Apart from the practical side concerning communication that stimulates multilingualism, an important role is played by the traditional assignment of language variation to certain spheres of life: one language is used at home and with neighbours, and another in an office or post office where people from the suburbs, who in everyday life use their own languages, and run their errands.

Assignment (for the student)

Assignment: Listen to the audio recording in Chontal– one of the endangered languages of Mexico. The person who is speaking in this recording switches several times between Chontal and another language used in the country. In linguistics, this phenomenon is called code-switching. Answer the questions concerning the recording. [\[file: Geo-ChontalAudio.wav\]](#)

- A. What is the second language used by the person speaking in the recording?
- B. Can you indicate the fragments where the code-switching takes place?
- C. What may be the cause for code-switching?

Information for the student: Are you interested in endangered languages? Check the website at www.languagesindanger.eu and find out more! On this website you can find, for example, exercises on Chontal.

Task 4

Background (for the teacher)

Nowadays, people often care more about a better social and economic status for their children and they want them to receive proper education, etc. As long as a domestic language is used in everyday communication, together with the dominant language of the region in a way that each language serves in a different domain, the indigenous one is relatively safe. The situation changes for worse when the users start perceiving their language as an obstacle in reaching their goals concerning the improvement of their life.

On many occasions, parents deliberately decide not to use the ethnic language in their contacts with children since the earliest days of their lives in order to “facilitate” their start into school and professional life that is filled with English or Spanish language. Children learn languages very fast and human beings have a natural ability to acquire more than one language since their childhood. Parents often don't realise that multilingualism is not an obstacle that prevents their children fulfilling their goals but an advantage stimulating their cognitive development.

On many occasions, small indigenous languages are treated as worse, flawed and not fit to serve in such spheres of life as education or literature. However, there is not a single language that would be more predisposed to certain tasks than others. A tradition present in certain regions ascribes a given language to certain domains. With the change of economic and social conditions

in the world, people can see that some languages dominate the media or politics in certain regions and as a result they are identified with power and prestige, whereas ethnic languages start to be associated with poverty and low social status.

Also democratic conditions influence linguistic diversity in the world. Migration from the countryside to a city has an impact on the situation of the indigenous cultures, including languages. When young people move to cities and start families, they break with the natural way of passing on culture and tradition, as well as language, to their offspring. A rural setting is more conducive to uniform cultures than to cultural and linguistic diversity.

Note! Students can discuss social and political aspects of language usage in task 5. If they touch upon this issues in this task, it's worth encouraging them to elaborate on the topic and use key words such as “prestige” and “power”.

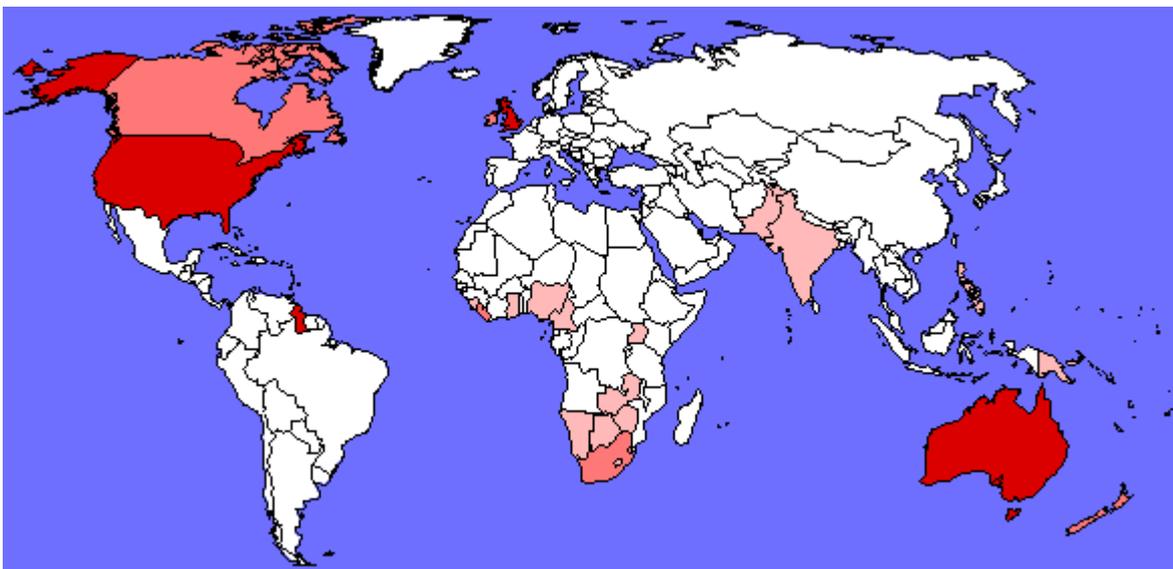
Assignment (for the student)

The other language indicated by you in task 3 is an official language of Mexico. There are more than half a billion speakers of it worldwide. Why has this language become so popular in the world? What are the results of this state of affairs for other languages, such as Chontal?

Task 5

Assignment (for the student)

Take a look at the map picturing the range of the English language as an official language in the countries of the world and look at the table which shows the number of languages spoken in some countries. Then answer the questions.



- countries where English is the first and often the only language for the majority of the population
- countries where at least one other language besides English is used as a native and official language
- countries where English is the only official language although it is not a native language for the great majority of the population

Map 4. English as an official language in the world. Source: *lazarus.elte.hu*

Table 1. Number of languages in selected countries. Source: Lewis (2009)

Country	Number of languages
India	452
Uganda	45
RSA	31
Papua New Guinea	841
Australia	274
Philippines	175
USA	176

- A. What part did colonialism take in the spreading of the English language in the world?
- B. Why is English an official language in some countries although it's not a native language of the inhabitants?
- C. Why is English the only official language in countries such as the USA and Australia, although many different languages are used in these countries?
- D. What is the main factor causing the increase in popularity of the English language in modern times? Consider the following issues:
 - cross-cultural communication
 - prestige
 - political conditions
 - the role of media
 - accessibility of the population of the world to multiple sources of information

Information for the teacher

This task shows the true attitude of students towards small endangered languages – are these languages worth saving and maintaining, are they an essential part of the wealth of human culture, or should one not care about their death. Depending on the results of the discussion you may pose some of the following questions:

- Is it good that there are so many languages in the world (about 7,000)?
- Would it be better for mankind if everybody spoke the same language?

- How would you feel in a situation where you couldn't use Facebook or pass your High School exams in your native language?
- How would you feel if you knew that your native language is bound to die soon?

Tip for the student: Check www.languagesindanger.eu and find out more about endangered languages!

