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**The structure of language**

from: <http://www.ecml.at/edl/default.asp?t=celebration>

1 Language is an arbitrary system of sounds and symbols which is used for many purposes by a group of people, chiefly to communicate with each other, to express cultural identity, to convey social relationships, and to provide a source of delight (for example, in literature). Languages differ from each other in their sounds, grammar, vocabulary, and patterns of discourse. But all languages are highly complex entities.

2 Languages vary in the number of their vowel and consonant sounds from less than a dozen to over a hundred. European languages tend to have inventories in the middle range - from around 25 such sounds (e.g. Spanish) to over 60 (e.g. Irish). Alphabets reflect these sounds with varying degrees of accuracy: some alphabets (e.g. Welsh) are very regular in the way they symbolise sounds; others (e.g. English) are very irregular.

3 Within grammar, each language comprises several thousand points of word formation and sentence construction. Each language has a huge vocabulary available to meet the needs of its users - in the case of European languages, where scientific and technical vocabulary is very large, this reaches several hundred thousand words and phrases.

4 Individual speakers know and use only a fraction of a language's total vocabulary. The words educated people use - their active vocabulary - can reach some 50,000 words; the words they know but do not use - their passive vocabulary - is somewhat larger. In everyday conversation, people often make use of a small number of words, but with great frequency. It has been estimated that a 21-year-old has already uttered some 50 million words.

5 Living languages and cultures are constantly changing. People influence each other in the way they speak and write. New media, such as the Internet, give languages fresh opportunities to grow. Languages are always in contact with each other, and affect each other in many ways, especially by borrowing words. English, for example, has over the centuries borrowed from over 350 languages, and European languages are all currently borrowing many words from English.

I. Read the text about languages and match the abstracts below with the text paragraphs.

- \_\_\_ a. Words match the demands of their users.
- \_\_\_ b. Language is a social phenomenon and changes with time.
- \_\_\_ c. Different sounds for different languages.
- \_\_\_ d. Definition of language.
- \_\_\_ e. I do not use those words but I understand them.

II. What is this?

"A written **symbol** or character representing a speech sound and being a component of an alphabet."

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

III. This is an extract from the text to the left:

"...some alphabets (e.g. Welsh) are very regular in the way they symbolise sounds; others (e.g. English) are very irregular."

What exactly does it mean?

1. Explain.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Give an example.

\_\_\_\_\_

IV. A representation of speech sounds in phonetic symbols is called **transcription**.

1 Write as many phonetic symbols as you can remember: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Transcribe (= write the pronunciation in phonetic symbols):
- a. meet \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. meat \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. man \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. break \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. go \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. know \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions with short answers. You will find the information in the text to the right.

1. Which branch of Germanic language family does English belong to?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Do Catalan and Sardinian belong to the same language family?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Is Irish a Germanic language?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the origin of Basque?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Is Estonian an Indo-European language?  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. How many members does the Caucasian language family have?  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Which writing system do most European languages use?  
\_\_\_\_\_

alphabet (Gr. *alpha-beta*, like Eng. ABC), system of writing

## Language families

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Languages are related to each other like the members of a family. Most of the languages of Europe can be grouped together, because of their common origins, as a single, large Indo-European language family. The families in Europe with the most member-languages and the most speakers are the Germanic, Romance, and Slavic.

The Germanic language family has a northern branch with Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Icelandic and Faeroese, as well as a western branch with German, Dutch, Frisian, English and Yiddish as its members. The Romance language family has as its members Romanian, Italian, Corsican, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Occitan, French, Romansh, Ladin and Sardinian. To the Slavic language family belong languages such as Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Polish, Sorbian, Czech, Slovak, Slovenian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian and Bulgarian. Within the Celtic family are Irish, Scots Gaelic, Welsh, and Breton, with revival movements under way for Cornish and Manx. To the Baltic family belong Latvian and Lithuanian. Separate families with only one member are Greek, Albanian and Armenian. Basque is an exceptional case, because it does not belong to the Indo-European family and its origins are unknown.

Other language families also have members in Europe. In the North we find the Uralic languages: Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, several Sámi languages, as well as other small languages in the northern parts of the Russian Federation such as Ingrian or Karelian. In the Southeast we find representatives of the Altaic language family, notably Turkish and Azerbaijani. The Caucasian family is spoken in a relatively small and compact area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, and comprises also about 40 members, among them Georgian, and Abkhaz. The Afro-Asiatic family includes Maltese, Hebrew and Berber.

All these languages use a small number of alphabetic scripts. Most languages use the Roman (or Latin) alphabet. Russian and some other Slavic languages use Cyrillic. Greek, Yiddish, Armenian and Georgian each have their own script. Non-European languages widely used on European territory include Arabic, Chinese and Hindi, each with its own writing system.

Ladin=A dialect of Romansh spoken in Engadine between Saint Moritz and the Austrian border  
Romansh=The Rhaeto-Romance dialect that is an official language of Switzerland. Also called Ladin.  
Manx=relating to the Isle of Man or its people, language, or culture.  
Sámi, Ingrian, Karelian languages=Finnic languages  
(Source: Dictionary.com)