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# THE WORLD'S MAJOR LANGUAGES

EDITED BY  
**BERNARD COMRIE**

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# Contents

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<b>Preface</b>	ix
<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	xi
<hr/>	
<b>Introduction</b>	1
BERNARD COMRIE, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA	
<hr/>	
<b>1 Indo-European Languages</b>	31
PHILIP BALDI, PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY	
<hr/>	
<b>2 Germanic Languages</b>	68
JOHN A. HAWKINS, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA	
3 English	77
EDWARD FINEGAN, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA	
4 German	110
JOHN A. HAWKINS, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA	
5 Dutch	139
JAN G. KOOIJ, UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN	
6 Danish, Norwegian and Swedish	157
EINAR HAUGEN, HARVARD UNIVERSITY	
<hr/>	
<b>7 Latin and the Italic Languages</b>	180
R.G.G. COLEMAN, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE	
<hr/>	
<b>8 Romance Languages</b>	203
JOHN N. GREEN, UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD	
9 French	210
MARTIN HARRIS, UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD	
10 Spanish	236
JOHN N. GREEN, UNIVERSITY OF BRADFORD	
11 Portuguese	260
STEPHEN PARKINSON, UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN	

---

<i>12 Italian</i>	279
NIGEL VINCENT, UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE	
<i>13 Rumanian</i>	303
GRAHAM MALLINSON, MONASH UNIVERSITY	
<i>14 Slavonic Languages</i>	322
BERNARD COMRIE, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA	
<i>15 Russian</i>	329
BERNARD COMRIE, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA	
<i>16 Polish</i>	348
GERALD STONE, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD	
<i>17 Czech and Slovak</i>	367
DAVID SHORT, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON	
<i>18 Serbo-Croat</i>	391
GREVILLE CORBETT, UNIVERSITY OF SURREY	
<i>19 Greek</i>	410
BRIAN D. JOSEPH, OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY	
<i>20 Indo-Aryan Languages</i>	440
GEORGE CARDONA, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA	
<i>21 Sanskrit</i>	448
GEORGE CARDONA, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA	
<i>22 Hindi-Urdu</i>	470
YAMUNA KACHRU, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN	
<i>23 Bengali</i>	490
M. H. KLAIMAN, LA TROBE UNIVERSITY	
<i>24 Iranian Languages</i>	514
J. R. PAYNE, UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER	
<i>25 Persian</i>	523
GERNOT L. WINDFUHR, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN	
<i>26 Pashto</i>	547
D. N. MACKENZIE, UNIVERSITY OF GÖTTINGEN	
<hr/> <i>27 Uralic Languages</i>	567
ROBERT AUSTERLITZ, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY	
<i>28 Hungarian</i>	577
DANIEL ABONDOLO, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY	
<i>29 Finnish</i>	593
MICHAEL BRANCH, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON	

---

<b>30</b>	<b>Turkish and the Turkic Languages</b>	619
	JAKLIN KORNFILT, SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY	
<b>31</b>	<b>Afroasiatic Languages</b>	645
	ROBERT HETZRON, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA BARBARA	
32	Semitic Languages	654
	ROBERT HETZRON, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA BARBARA	
33	<i>Arabic</i>	664
	ALAN S. KAYE, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY FULLERTON	
34	<i>Hebrew</i>	686
	ROBERT HETZRON, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA BARBARA	
35	Hausa and the Chadic Languages	705
	PAUL NEWMAN, INDIANA UNIVERSITY	
<b>36</b>	<b>Tamil and the Dravidian Languages</b>	725
	SANFORD B. STEEVER, CENTRAL INDIAN INSTITUTE OF LANGUAGES	
<b>37</b>	<b>Tai Languages</b>	747
	DAVID STRECKER, CINCINNATI	
38	<i>Thai</i>	757
	THOMAS JOHN HUDAK, UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY	
<b>39</b>	<b>Vietnamese</b>	777
	ĐÌNH-HOÀ NGUYỄN, SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY AT CARBONDALE	
<b>40</b>	<b>Sino-Tibetan Languages</b>	797
	SCOTT DELANCEY, UNIVERSITY OF OREGON	
41	<i>Chinese</i>	811
	CHARLES N. LI AND SANDRA A. THOMPSON, BOTH UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SANTA BARBARA	
42	<i>Burmese</i>	834
	JULIAN K. WHEATLEY, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY FRESNO	
<b>43</b>	<b>Japanese</b>	855
	MASAYOSHI SHIBATANI, KOBE UNIVERSITY	
<b>44</b>	<b>Korean</b>	881
	NAM-KIL KIM, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA	

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<b>45 Austronesian Languages</b>	899
ROSS CLARK, UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND	
46 <i>Malay (Indonesian and Malaysian)</i>	913
D.J. PRENTICE, UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN	
47 <i>Tagalog</i>	936
PAUL SCHACHTER, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES	
<b>48 Niger-Kordofanian Languages</b>	959
DOUGLAS PULLEYBLANK, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA	
49 <i>Yoruba</i>	971
DOUGLAS PULLEYBLANK, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA	
50 <i>Swahili and the Bantu Languages</i>	991
BENJI WALD, NATIONAL CENTER FOR BILINGUAL RESEARCH USA	
<b>Language Index</b>	1015

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# Preface

This work represents the fruits of the collaboration of 44 scholars with international reputations ranging across a broad spectrum of the world's languages.

Perhaps the most controversial problem that I, as editor, have had to face has been the choice of languages to be included. My main criterion has, admittedly, been a very subjective one: what languages do I think the volume's readership would expect to find included? In answering this question I have, of course, been guided by more objective criteria, such as the number of speakers of individual languages, whether they are official languages of independent states, whether they are widely used in more than one country, whether they are the bearers of long-standing literary traditions. These criteria often conflict — thus Latin, though long since deprived of native speakers, is included because of its immense cultural importance — and I bear full responsibility, as editor, for the final choice. I acknowledge that the criterion of readership expectation has led me to bias the choice of languages in favour of European languages, although over half of the volume is devoted to languages spoken outside Europe.

The notion of 'major language' is obviously primarily a social characterisation, and the fact that a language is not included in this volume implies no denigration of its importance as a language in its own right: every human language is a manifestation of our species' linguistic faculty and any human language may provide an important contribution to our understanding of language as a general phenomenon. In the recent development of general linguistics, important contributions have come from the Australian Aboriginal languages Walbiri (Warlpiri) and Dyirbal (Jirrbal). My own research work has concentrated largely on languages that do not figure in this volume, such as Huichol of Mexico and Maltese of the Mediterranean, and as I write these lines I am about to embark on a year's field-work on Wiyaw, the language of some 1,000 New Guinea Highlanders. Other editors might well have come up with different selections of languages, or have used somewhat different criteria. When linguists learned in 1970 that the last speaker of Kamassian, a Uralic language originally spoken in Siberia, had

kept her language alive for decades in her prayers — God being the only other speaker of her language — they may well have wondered whether, for this person, *the* world's major language was not Kamassian.

Contributors were presented with early versions of my own chapters on Slavonic languages and Russian as models for their contributions, but I felt it inappropriate to lay down strict guidelines as to how each individual chapter should be written, although I did ask authors to include at least some material on both the structure of their language and its social background. The main criterion that I asked contributors to follow was: tell the reader what you consider to be the most interesting facts about your language. This has necessarily meant that different chapters highlight different phenomena, e.g. the chapter on English the role of English as a world language, the chapter on Arabic the writing system, the chapter on Turkish the grammatical system. But I believe that this variety has lent strength to the volume, since within the space limitations of what has already grown to be quite a sizable book it would have been impossible to do justice in a more comprehensive and homogeneous way to each of over 50 languages and language families.

Editorial support in the preparation of this work was provided by the Division of Humanities of the University of Southern California, through the research fund of the Andrew W. Mellon Professorship, which I held during 1983–4, and by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (Nijmegen, The Netherlands), where I was a visiting research worker in the summer of 1984. I am particularly grateful to Jonathan Price for his continuing willingness to consult with me on all details of the preparation of the volume.

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