

Native American Languages

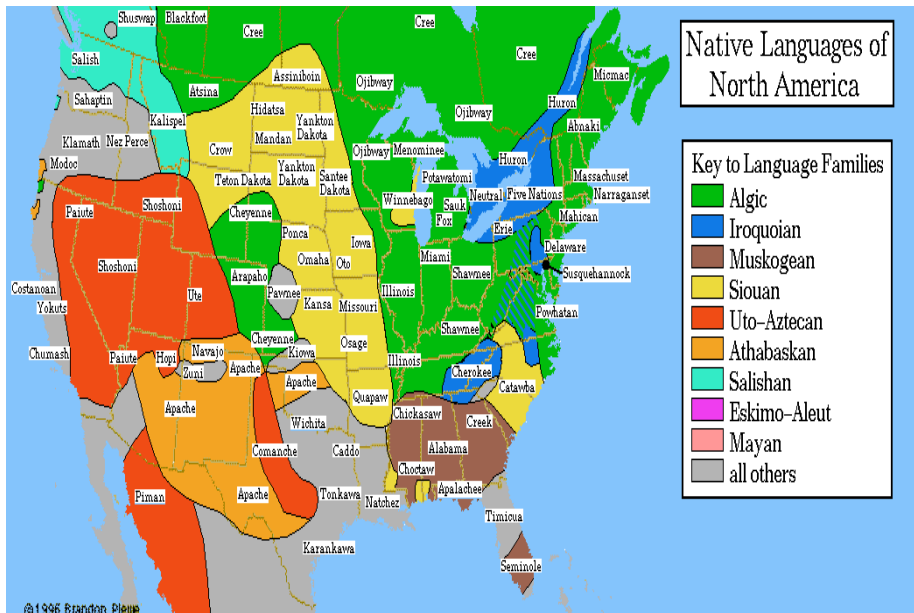
Variety

There were around 250 different languages spoken in the United States before the arrival of Europeans. These languages showed tremendous variety. Individuals from three areas a hundred miles apart might **very likely** have been completely unable to communicate by speech.

Complexity

The spoken languages had complex grammars. Except for the Mayans and their neighboring tribes, none of the native languages of America had a writing system until the arrival of Europeans.

Akesa 7/21/15 11:06 AM
Comment [1]: Teacher asks:
What impact does using the term **very likely** have on the meaning of the sentence?

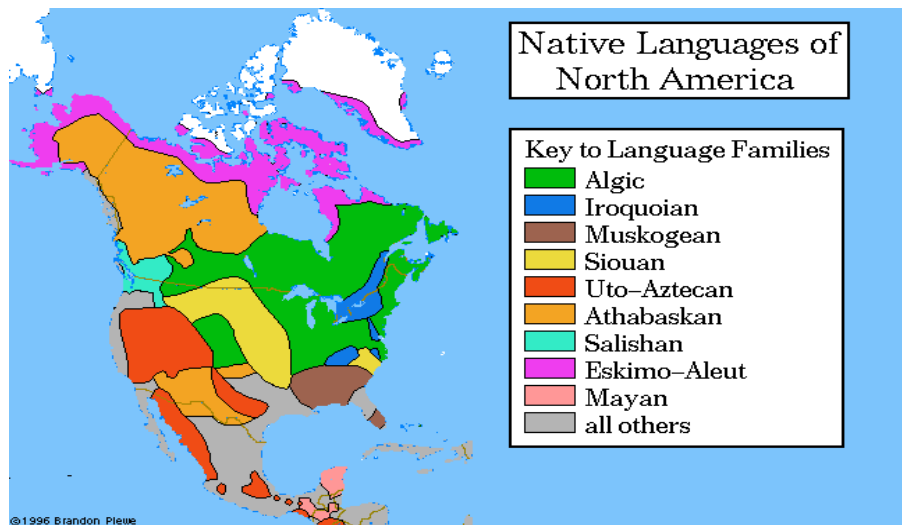


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Language Families

There are some similarities between the early languages of the Americas, and differences between others. Those that are similar are grouped into language families. **A language family is a group of languages with a common origin and which separated into different dialects and languages over the course of time.** The present territory of the continental United States was home to several prevalent language families, in contrast to the two of Europe.

Indigenous Language Families of North America



The maps on this page show nine important language families which existed in the present-day territory of the United States before they were largely displaced by English over the last few centuries.

These included Algic (Algonquin), Iroquoian, Muskogean, Siouan, Athabaskan, Uto-Aztecan, Salishan and Eskimo-Aleut. In addition, there were many other smaller families, such as Sahaptian, Miwok-Costanoan, Kiowa-Tanoan and Caddoan. Some languages, such as Zuni, have no known relationship with any other language, and are known as isolates.

Bias in Maps-

Creating such maps with any degree of **precision** has its difficulties. Back then, there were no countries like there are today. Many populations moved seasonally, as the lifestyle adapted to local climate. Almost all moved permanent homelands from place to place as Europeans moved in, usually to the west, but movement and resettlement also occurred frequently before colonization began.

In addition, there is great uncertainty in many cases about exactly which people were living in a given location at any given point in time. Thus, the boundaries on the map are not to be taken too seriously. They are meant to represent the approximate regions where each language family was spoken at the time that European civilization reached the areas in question.

Survival of Native American Languages Today

The arrival of European culture was not kind to the Native American Indigenous cultures. The population of the native civilizations fell from about 20 million to the present level of less than 2 million. Languages also suffered due to English being spoken among those of Native American ancestry. Most Native American languages have ceased to exist, or are spoken only by older speakers, with whom the language will die in the coming decades.

Only 8 indigenous languages of the area of the continental United States currently have a population of speakers in the U.S. and Canada large enough to populate a medium-sized town. Only Navajo still has a population of greater than 25,000 within the U.S.

Language	Family	Locations	Speakers
Navajo	Athabaskan	AZ, NM, UT	148,530
Cree	Algic	MT, Canada	60,000
Ojibwa	Algic	MN, ND, MT, MI, Canada	51,000
Cherokee	Iroquoian	OK, NC	22,500
Dakota	Siouan	NE, ND, SD, MN, MT, Canada	20,000
Apache	Athabaskan	NM, AZ, OK	15,000
Blackfoot	Algic	MT, Canada	10,000
Choctaw	Muskogean	OK, MS, LA	9,211

Why did Native American Languages die?

Boarding Schools

In the late 1800's (1879), as settler populations grew, the colonial (English) governments started to try to erase Native languages by sending Native students to white boarding schools to learn, "the white man's way of life." by speaking English only and not their Native languages. They thought that if they could "Kill the Indian, save the man" they would be able to change Native Americans into what they wanted them to be.

"Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted" (Atkins, 1887)

Native boarding school students were punished for speaking their Native languages and therefore began speaking English. Without speaking a language, it is easy for it to be forgotten.

Economic

As U.S. business began to grow, it was developed around speaking English. In order to trade or find jobs, one needed to speak English.

Generational

Younger generations are not speaking Native languages and the older speakers are dying and taking the language with them.

Resources:

1. Rehling, John. "Native American Languages." *John Rehling*. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.cogsci.indiana.edu/farg/rehling/nativeAm/ling.html>>.
 2. Crawford, James. "Endangered Native American Languages: What Is to Be Done , and Why?" *THE BILINGUAL RESEARCH JOURNAL* 19.1 (1995): 17-38. https://castl.duq.edu/Conferences/Urbanlearnr/Endangered_Native_American.pdf. THE BILINGUAL RESEARCH JOURNAL. Web. 24 July 2015. <<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ubjr20/current>>.
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