



Ancient Languages

The oldest languages in the world have a fascinating history that takes us back thousands of years. Languages like Sumerian, Akkadian, and Egyptian are among the earliest known languages with clear written records, dating back at least 4,600 years. However, these languages are now extinct and do not have any living descendants.

While these ancient languages are now **extinct** and have no living speakers today, their influence can still be seen in many modern languages. Other ancient languages, such as **Hebrew**, **Sanskrit**, and **Chinese**, continue to thrive and are still spoken by millions of people around the world.

The world's oldest language, based on written records, is Sumerian. It is considered the oldest known written language, with its earliest evidence dating back to around 3100 BCE in ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). Sumerian was primarily used for administrative and business records, and it played a significant role in the development of other languages in the region before it was eventually replaced by Akkadian as a spoken language around 2000 BCE. However, it continued to be used in written form for many centuries thereafter.

Other ancient languages, such as Egyptian (around 3200 BCE) and Akkadian (around 2800 BCE), also have very old written records. Egyptian evolved through various stages, including hieroglyphs and

later the Coptic script, and Akkadian was widely used in Mesopotamia for a range of purposes, from legal documents to literary texts like the "Epic of Gilgamesh".

While languages like Tamil and Sanskrit are also ancient and still spoken today, Sumerian holds the title of the oldest recorded language due to its early written documentation.

Sumerian

Sumerian is considered the world's oldest written language, first appearing around 3100 BCE in ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). It is a language isolate, meaning it has no known relatives, making it unique in linguistic history. Sumerian developed the cuneiform script, the earliest known form of writing, initially using pictographs that evolved into wedge-shaped symbols. This script was used extensively for administrative, legal, and literary purposes, including significant texts like the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Sumerian King List.

Though Sumerian ceased as a spoken language around 2000 BCE, it continued to be used in writing for religious, ceremonial, and scholarly purposes until the 1st century AD. The language was pivotal in the cultural and administrative life of ancient Mesopotamia, influencing neighboring languages and scripts like Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian. Its decipherment in the 19th century provided deep insights into early human civilization and writing systems.

Akkadian

Akkadian is an ancient Semitic language spoken in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq and Syria) from around 2800 BCE to 500 CE. It was the first Semitic language to be written and became the dominant language of the Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian empires. Written in cuneiform script, Akkadian used a combination of symbols for sounds and words, and had up to 400 different signs.

The language split into two main dialects: Assyrian and Babylonian, which remained in use for scholarly and liturgical purposes even after the Akkadian Empire's fall. Akkadian texts include religious myths, legal codes, scientific writings, and the famous Epic of Gilgamesh, offering insights into early Mesopotamian culture and history.

Egyptian

The Egyptian language, an extinct branch of the Afro-Asiatic languages, was spoken in ancient Egypt and has the longest written history of any known language, spanning over 4,000 years. It is known from a large corpus of surviving texts written in hieroglyphic script beginning in the late 4th millennium BCE. Egyptian language history is divided into five main periods: Old Egyptian (c. 3000–2200 BCE), Middle Egyptian (c. 2200–1600 BCE), Late Egyptian (c. 1550–700 BCE), Demotic (c. 700 BCE–400 CE), and Coptic (c. 150 CE to the 17th century). Coptic is still used today in the liturgy of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Top 10 Oldest languages Still Spoken Today

Sumerian, Akkadian, and Egyptian are some of the oldest languages in the world, but they are now extinct, meaning they are no longer spoken or used today. This brings up another question: what is the oldest living language still spoken today?

There isn't a clear answer for the oldest language in the world, but there are a few strong candidates. Here are the 12 oldest languages that are still in use today.

1. Tamil

Tamil highlight is one of the oldest living languages in the world. Tamil is part of the Dravidian language family and has a rich history that dates back over 2,000 years. The earliest known written records of Tamil date back to the 3rd century BCE, and it has continued to evolve over the centuries. Key literary works such as the Tholkappiyam and Sangam literature are central to Tamil's ancient heritage and are believed to be around 2,000 to 2,500 years old.

There is ongoing debate among scholars about whether Tamil or Sanskrit is the oldest language in the world. While Sanskrit is often recognized for its ancient texts like the Vedas, which date back over 3,500 years, Tamil is distinguished by its continuous use as a spoken and literary language. Tamil is also one of the few ancient languages that has preserved its classical form through both literature and everyday speech, making it a unique contender for the title of the "oldest living language."

2. Sanskrit

Sanskrit is often considered one of the oldest languages in the world, particularly among the Indo-European languages. It is most well-known as the language of ancient Hindu scriptures, including the Vedas, which date back to between 1500 and 1200 BCE. Sanskrit remains a vital part of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religious practices and is recognized for its profound influence on many modern Indian languages and classical Indian literature. Despite its ancient roots, Sanskrit is still used today in religious ceremonies and scholarly work, maintaining its presence as a liturgical and ceremonial language.

3. Chinese

Chinese uses a logographic writing system, meaning each character represents a word or a meaningful part of a word. This script is one of the few ancient scripts still in use today. There are several Chinese dialects, with Mandarin (Putonghua) being the most widely spoken. Other major dialects include Cantonese, Wu, Min, and Hakka.

Mandarin Chinese is not only the official language of China but also one of the six official languages of the United Nations. It is the most spoken first language in the world, with over a billion speakers.

4. Greek

Ancient Greek literature includes some of the world's most enduring works, such as Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey", and the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. These works have had a profound influence on Western literature and culture.

Modern English has borrowed a significant number of words from Greek, especially in fields like science, medicine, and philosophy. Words like "democracy", "philosophy", "academy", and "theater" all have Greek origins.

Greek has been spoken for over 3,000 years, making it one of the oldest languages in Europe. The earliest written evidence of Greek dates back to around 1450 BCE with the Linear B script, used for writing Mycenaean Greek.

Current Status: Greek is spoken by approximately 13-15 million people worldwide. The majority of speakers reside in Greece, where Greek is the official language, and in Cyprus, where it is one of the official languages.

5. Hebrew

Hebrew is one of the oldest languages in the world, originally used by ancient Israelites for religious texts and practices. Although it ceased being a daily spoken language for many centuries,

Hebrew was revived in the late 19th century by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda to create a modern spoken language for Jewish people in their homeland. This revival was a significant cultural effort that led to Hebrew becoming the official language of Israel in 1948. Today, Hebrew is spoken by millions in Israel and around the world, symbolizing Jewish identity and heritage.

Archaeological findings, like the Qeiyafa Ostrakon, show that Hebrew script dates back to the early Iron Age, around the 10th century BCE, highlighting its ancient origins and direct development from the Phoenician script.

6. Aramaic

Aramaic is an ancient Semitic language that originated around the 11th century BCE in modern-day Syria. It became widely used as a common language across the Near East, especially during the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, and Persian Empires. Aramaic served as a language for administration, trade, and diplomacy, making it a key language of the ancient world.

Despite its decline as a spoken language, Aramaic remains significant in religious texts, including the Talmud and Zohar, and some Christian liturgies. Small communities still speak modern dialects of Aramaic in parts of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, but the language is endangered due to a shrinking number of speakers.

7. Farsi

Farsi, also known as Persian, is an ancient language with a rich history spanning over 2,500 years. It is part of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family and has evolved through three main stages: Old Persian, Middle Persian, and New Persian. Old Persian was used in the royal inscriptions of the Achaemenid Empire from the 6th to 4th centuries BCE. Middle Persian, or Pahlavi, became prominent after the Achaemenid period and continued through the Sassanian era until the Islamic conquest in the 7th century CE. Modern Persian, also known as Farsi in Iran, Dari in Afghanistan, and Tajik in Tajikistan, emerged in the 9th century and is the language spoken today by over 100 million people worldwide.

The Persian language has significantly influenced other languages, including Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, and even English, through its rich vocabulary and literary contributions. Persian literature is highly regarded, especially for its poetry, with famous poets like Rumi, Hafez, and Ferdowsi contributing to its global renown. The Persian script, derived from Arabic, is written from right to left and consists of 32 letters.

8. Arabic

Arabic has a long and rich history that goes back more than 1,500 years. It is a Semitic language that started in the Arabian Peninsula. The oldest form of the language, Old Arabic, dates back to the 4th century CE. It became the language of the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam. Today, Arabic is spoken by over 420 million people around the world.

Over time, Arabic has developed into different forms and dialects. There is Classical Arabic (also called Quranic Arabic), which is used in religious contexts. Modern Standard Arabic is the form used in media and formal settings, like on the news. There are also regional dialects, such as Levantine Arabic (spoken in Lebanon and Syria) and Egyptian Arabic (spoken in Egypt), which vary greatly depending on the region.

9. Armenian

The Armenian language is one of the oldest languages in the world, with a rich history that dates back over 1,500 years. It is an Indo-European language with its own unique branch, distinct from other languages. The language is primarily spoken in Armenia and by the Armenian diaspora worldwide, totaling about 6.7 million speakers globally.

Armenian has a unique alphabet created by Mesrop Mashtots in 405 AD, consisting of 39 letters. The language has evolved through three main historical stages: Classical Armenian (also known as Grabar), Middle Armenian, and Modern Armenian. Modern Armenian has two main dialects: Eastern Armenian (spoken in Armenia and Iran) and Western Armenian (spoken by Armenian communities in the diaspora).

10. Irish Gaelic

Irish Gaelic, also known as Gaeilge, is one of the oldest living languages in the world with a history spanning over 2,000 years. It is a Celtic language closely related to Scottish Gaelic and Manx Gaelic. The earliest evidence of the Irish language dates back to the 4th century AD, with inscriptions found on Ogham stones, an ancient form of writing used by the Celts. Over the centuries, the Irish language evolved through different stages, including Old Irish, Middle Irish, and Modern Irish, which is still spoken today.

11. Basque

Basque, or Euskara, is a language isolate, meaning it has no known relatives or connections to any other language. It is the only remaining language from the pre-Indo-European era in southwestern Europe. Basque is primarily spoken in the Basque Country, which includes parts of northern Spain and southwestern France.

A recent discovery, the Hand of Irulegi, provides the earliest known text in ancient Basque, dating back over 2,000 years. This artifact suggests that the Basque people used written forms earlier than previously believed, challenging the idea that they were illiterate before Roman influence.

Today, Basque is spoken by around 900,000 people and remains a vital part of Basque culture and identity. The language was standardized in the 1960s to create a unified version known as Euskara Batua, ensuring its preservation and continued use.

12. Latin

Latin is an ancient Indo-European language that originated in the Italic group and was first spoken along the Tiber River in central Italy. It expanded across Europe with the growth of Roman power, becoming the foundation for the Romance languages like Italian, French, and Spanish. Latin influenced modern languages, legal terms, and scientific vocabulary due to its precise grammar and rich vocabulary.

Latin evolved through several stages: Old Latin, Classical Latin (used in literature and official documents), Vulgar Latin (spoken by common people and precursor to Romance languages), and Late Latin (used in the later Roman Empire and Middle Ages). Vulgar Latin diverged into different dialects, which eventually evolved into modern Romance language.¹

¹ “15 Oldest Languages in the World (Including 12 Still Spoken)”, **Geeks for Geeks**, <https://www.geeksforgeeks.org/oldest-languages-in-the-world/>

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