

The languages of Africa

Africa is very big continent with a very long history. People have lived in African for hundreds of thousands of years, in many different groups. So the different groups of people in Africa speak many different languages.

There are about 2000 languages in Africa. That's about 30% of all the languages in the world.

Language Families

The African languages are in four big families of languages. The biggest families are:

Afroasiatic - the languages people speak in North Africa and Middle East, including Arabic, Amharic, Hausa. There are about 200 languages in this family.

Nilo-Saharan - the languages people speak in Sudan and Chad, including Songhay, Luo, Dinka. There are about 140 languages in this family.

Niger-Congo - the languages people speak in West, Central and South-East Africa, including Bantu, Yoruba, Swahili, Shona. It is the largest family of languages in the world. There are about 1500 languages in this family.

Khoisan - the languages people speak in Namibia and Botswana, including Khoe and Tuu languages. There are about 30 languages in this family.

The biggest languages

Some of the languages have a large number of speakers

Arabic - About 100 million people speak Arabic in Africa. Many speak it as their first language, as in Egypt, and many speak it as the official language of the country, as in Algeria.

Swahili -Swahili is the biggest language in Africa. More than 100 million people speak Swahili. It is the official language in many countries, like Kenya and Uganda. The name of the language is really 'Kiswahili' – this is the Swahili word for the name of the language. It is a Bantu language. It has many words from Arabic in the language.

Hausa - Hausa is a big language with more than 40 million speakers. It is one of Nigeria's official languages. People speak it in Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, CAR, Chad, Congo and many parts of West Africa and North Africa. You can say hello in Hausa with the word 'Sannu'.

Yoruba - Many people in Nigeria, Benin and Togo speak Yoruba. About 30 million people speak Yoruba. It is one of Nigeria's official languages. You can say hello in Yoruba with the word 'Bawo'.

Igbo - Igbo is a big language with more than 20 million speakers. It is one of Nigeria's official languages. People speak it in Nigeria and Cameroon. It is part of the Niger-Congo family of languages.

Amharic - About 22 million people speak Amharic in Ethiopia. It is a very old language, part of the family of Semitic languages – like Arabic and Hebrew. Amharic has its own alphabet – it doesn't use the Latin alphabet but a beautiful alphabet called 'Ge'ez'. The Tigrinya language is part of the same family.

Shona - Shona is a Bantu language. People speak it in Zambia and Zimbabwe, and it is the official language of Zimbabwe. To say hello in Shona, you can say 'Mhoro'.

Xhosa - Many people in South Africa speak Xhosa. The real name of the language is isiXhosa. It is a Bantu language but it is different from other languages. People make 'click' sounds as well as the usual sounds. To say hello in Shona, you can say 'Molo'.

Others - There are many more important African languages. These include Berber in the North and Zulu in the South, Fulani in the East and Kinyarwanda in the centre of Africa. There are a lot of African languages to learn.

New words for this article

1	continent	a large section of land with many countries on it
2	alphabet	the way we write letters of the language
3	click	sounds you make with your tongue and mouth

Comprehension Questions

- How many language are there in Africa?
- How many language families are there in Africa?
- Which is the largest language family in the world?
- Which is the biggest language in Africa?
- Which language has its own alphabet?

5	Amharic has its own alphabet
4	Swahili is the biggest language in Africa.
3	The Niger-Congo family is the largest family of languages in the world
2	The African languages are in four big families
1	There are about 2000 languages in Africa

Questions de compréhension en lecture
Comprehension questions

Answers