# An Analysis of the Difficulty of Learning Various Foreign Languages for English speakers – Indo-European Languages

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**Method.** 42 IE languages were examined. A literature survey, combined with interviews of various L2 language learners was conducted. In addition, 100 years of surveys on the question by language instructors was reviewed. The US military's School of Languages in Monterey's ratings system for difficulty of learning various languages was analyzed.

Results were collated in an impressionistic manner along a majority rules line in order to form final opinions. For example, a minority said that Portuguese or Spanish were very hard to learn, but the consensus view was that they were quite easy. In this case, the minority opinion was rejected, and the consensus view was adopted. The work received a tremendous amount of criticism, often hostile to very hostile, after publication, and many changes were made to the text.

Clearly, such a project will necessarily be more impressionistic than scientific. Scientific tests of the relative difficulty of learning different languages will have to await the development of algorithms specifically designed to measure such things. And even then, surely there will be legions of "We can't prove anything" naysayers.

One common criticism was that, "In Linguistics, the standard view is that there is no such thing as an easy or difficult language to learn. All languages are equally difficult or easy to learn." Unless we are talking about children learning an L1 (and even then that's a dubious assertion) this statement was rejected as simply untrue.

**Results.** A ratings system was designed in terms of how difficult it would be for an English-language speaker to learn the language. In the case of English, English was judged according to how hard it would be for a non-English speaker to learn the language. Speaking,

reading and writing were all considered.

**Ratings**: Languages are rated 1-6, easiest to hardest. 1 = easiest, 2 = moderately easy to average, 3 = average to moderately difficult, 4 = very difficult, 5 = extremely difficult, 6 = most difficult of all. Ratings are impressionistic.

**Time needed.** Time needed for an English language speaker to learn the language "reasonably well": Level 1 languages = 3 months-1 year. Level 2 languages = 6 months-1 year. Level 3 languages = 1-2 years. Level 4 languages = 2 years. Level 5 languages = 3-4 years, but some may take longer. Level 6 languages = more than 4 years.

**Conclusion.** The results of this study indicate that languages do indeed differ dramatically in how difficult they are for L2 English language learners.

## Indo-European

## Indo-Iranian

## Indo-Aryan

Indo-Ayran languages like Kashmiri, Hindi and especially Sanskrit are quite hard, and Sanskrit is legendary for its extreme complexity.

## Central Zone

## Western Hindi

## Hindustani

## Khariboli

The **Hindi** script is quite opaque to Westerners, some of whom say that Chinese script is easier. You speak one way if you are talking to a man or a woman, and you also need to take into account whether you as speaker are male or female. Gender is also as prominent as in Spanish; you have to remember whether any given noun is masculine or feminine. Hindi is definitely an IE language by its rich system of gender, case and number inflection.

The most difficult aspects of Hindi are the pronunciation and the case system. In addition, Hindi is split ergative, and not only that, but it actually has a tripartite ergative system, and the ergativity is split by tense like in Persian.

The distinction between aspirated/unaspirated and alveolar/retroflex consonants is hard for many to make. There is a four-way distinction in the *t* and *d* sounds with aspirated/unaspirated dental and aspirated/unaspirated retroflex *t*'s and *d*'s. The are three different r sounds - one that sounds like the English r and two retroflex *r*'s that are quite hard to make or even distinguish, especially at the end of a word. Hindi also has nasalized vowels.

If you come from a language that has case, Hindi's case system will not be overly difficult.

In addition, there is a completely separate word for each number from 1-100, which seems unnecessarily complicated.

However, Hindi has a number of cognates with English. I am not sure if they are Indic loans into English or they share a common root going back to Proto-Indo-European (PIE).

*loot* - *plunder/destroy*, English *loot*

*mausaum* - *season/weather*, English *monsoon*

*toofan* - *storm*, English *typhoon*

*kammarban*d - something tied around the waist, English *cummerbund*

*badnaam* - literally bad name, means *bad reputation*. These are both cognates to the English words *bad* and *name*.

*bangalaa* - *house*, English b*ungalow*

*jangal* – English *jungle*

*pandit* - *priest*, English *pundit*

Nevertheless, Hindi typically gets a high score in ratings of difficult languages to learn. Based on this high score across multiple surveys, we will give it a relatively high rating.

Hindi is **rated 4**, very hard to learn.

**Punjabi** is probably harder than any other Indic language in terms of phonology because it uses tones. It's like Hindi with tones. It has either two or three tones: high or high-falling, low or low-rising and possibly a neutral or mid tone. It is very odd for an IE language to have tones.

Punjabi is **rated 4.5,** very difficult.

## Eastern Zone

## Assamese–Bengali

**Bengali** is similar to Hindi, but it lacks grammatical gender, and that fact alone makes it much easier to learn. Bengalis speak tend to make stereotypical gender errors when speaking in Hindi. Nevertheless, it uses the Sanskrit alphabet, and that alone makes it hard to read and write.

Bengali is **rated 3.5**, harder than average to learn.

# Northern Zone

## Eastern Pahari

**Nepali** is a very difficult language to learn as it has a complex grammar. It has case not for nouns themselves but for clause constituents. It has tense, aspect, and voice. Nepali has an unbelievable 11 noun classes or genders, and affixes on the verb mark the gender, number, and person of the subject. It even has split ergativity, strange for an IE language.

Nepali has the odd feature, like Japanese, of having verbs that have completely different positive and negative forms.

*hũ ~ hoina* (*I am ~ I am not*)
*chas ~ chainas* (*you (intimate) are ~ you are not*)
*bolchu ~ boldina* (*I speak ~ I don't speak*)

Note the extreme differences on the conjugation of the present tense of the verb *to be* between 1 singular and 2 familiar singular. They look nothing like each other at all.

Adjectives decline in peculiar way. There is an inflection on adjectives that means "qualified." So can say this by either inflecting the adjective:

*dublo ~ dublai* (*tall ~ quite tall*)
*hoco ~ hocai* (*short ~ rather short*)
*rāmro ~ rāmrai* (*nice ~ nice enough*)

or by putting the invariant qualifying adverb in front of the adjective:

*ali dublo quite tall*
*ali hoco rather short*
*ali rāmro nice enough*

Nepali gets a **4.5 rating**, very difficult.

## Northwestern Zone

## Sinhalese-Maldivian

**Sinhala** is also difficult.

Sinhala is **rated 4**, very difficult.

## Sanskrit

**Sanskrit** is legendary for its difficulty. It has a script that goes on for long sequences in which many small individual words may be buried. You have to take apart the sequences to find the small words. The words are further masked by tone sandhi running everything together. Once you tease the sandhi apart, you have to deal with hundreds of compound characters in the script. After you do those two things, you are left with eight cases, nine declensions, dual number, and other fun things.

Even native speakers tend to make grammatical mistakes and admit that parts of the grammar are fiendishly difficult. There are many grammatical features that are rarely or never found in any other language. Noun declension is based on the letter that the noun ends in, for instance, nouns that end in *a*, *e*, or *u* all decline differently. There are three genders for nouns, and all decline differently. Each noun has eight cases and three numbers (singular, dual, and plural), so there are 24 different forms for each noun. Counting the different combinations of endings and genders (all subsumed into a sort of noun class system), there are 20 different "noun classes."

Combining the "noun classes" with the three genders, you end up with 1,440 different regular forms that nouns can take. To make matters worse, some of the cases have different forms themselves. And there are some exceptions to these rules. The *I* and *you*

pronouns decline differently, but pronouns are simple compared to nouns.

For the verbs, each verb exists in 10 different forms of tense or mood (one from Vedic Sanskrit is no longer used). There are six tenses and four moods. The six tenses are: one present tense, two future tenses, and three past tenses.

The moods are: imperative, dubitive (expresses uncertainty), optative (expresses hope or offers a benediction), and a form that expresses the concept *if only, then...* There are two different conjugations based on who is the beneficiary of the action, you or others. There are ten different classes of verbs, each of which conjugates differently. Additionally, each verb has a different form in the singular, dual, and plural and in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd persons.

Once you get past all of that, you are ready to take on the really difficult parts of the language - participles, noun derivatives and agglutination - each of which is far more complicated than any of the above. To add insult to injury, Sanskrit has pitch accent.

Nevertheless, the language is so mathematically precise and regular that some have said it is a perfect language for computer programming. There may not even be a single irregularity in the whole language.

Sanskrit is **rated 5**, extremely difficult.

## Indo-Iranian

## Iranian

## Western Iranian

## Southwestern Iranian

## Iranian

**Persian** is easier to learn than its reputation, as some say this is a difficult language to learn. In truth, it's difficulty is only average, and

it is one of the easier IE languages to learn. On the plus side, Persian has a very simple grammar, and it is quite regular. It has no grammatical gender, case, or articles, and adjectives never change form. Its noun system is as easy as that of English. The verbal system is a bit harder than English's, but it is still much easier than in even the Romance languages. The phonology is very simple.

On the down side, you will have to learn Arabic script. There are many lexical borrowings from Arabic which have no semantic equivalents in Persian.

English: *two* (native English word) ~ *double* (Latin borrowing)
Note the semantic transparency in the Latin borrowing.

Persian: *do* (native Persian word) ~ *tasneyat* (Arabic borrowing)
Note the utter lack of semantic correlation in the Arabic borrowing.

Some morphology was borrowed as well:

| | |
|---|---|
| *ketāb* | *book* |
| *kotobxānah* | *library* (has an Arabic broken plural) |

It is a quite easy language to learn at the entry level, but it is much harder to learn at the advanced level, say Sufi poetry, due to difficulty in untangling subtleties of meaning.

Persian gets a **3 rating** as average difficulty.

## Northwestern Iranian

## Kurdish

**Kurdish** is about as hard to learn as Persian, but it has the added difficulty of pharyngeals, which are very hard for English speakers to make.

Like Persian, it is no gender or case, and it also has a tense split ergative system.

Kurdish gets a **4 rating**, very hard to learn.

## Eastern Iranian

## Northeastern

**Ossetian** is a strange Iranian language that has somehow developed ejectives due to proximity of Caucasian languages which had them. An IE language with ejectives? How odd.

Ossetian gets a **4 rating**, very hard to learn.

## Indo-European

## Romance

## Italo-Western

## Italo-Dalmatian

**Italian** is easy to learn, especially if you speak a Romance language or English, but learning to order a pizza and really mastering it are two different things. Foreigners usually do not learn Italian at anywhere near a native level.

For instance, Italian has three types of tenses - simple, compound, and indefinite.

There are also various moods that combine to take tense forms - four subjunctive moods, two conditional moods, two gerund moods, two infinite moods, two participle moods, and one imperative mood.

There are eight tenses in the indicative mood - recent past, remote pluperfect, recent pluperfect, preterite (remote past), imperfect, present, future, and future perfect. There are four tenses in the

subjunctive mood - present, imperfect, preterite, and pluperfect. There are two tenses in the conditional mood - present and preterite. There is only one tense in the imperative mood - present. Gerund, participle and infinite moods all take only present and perfect tenses.

Altogether, using these mood-tense combinations, any Italian verb can decline in up to 21 different ways. However, most Italians have little understanding of many of these tenses and moods. They do not know how to use them correctly. Hence they are often only used by the most educated people. So an Italian learner does not need to learn all of these tenses and moods.

Italian has many irregular verbs. There are 600 irregular verbs with all sorts of different irregularities. Nevertheless, it is a Romance language, and Romance has gotten rid of most of its irregularity. The Slavic languages are much more irregular than Romance.

Counterintuitively, some Italian words are masculine in the singular and feminine in the plural. There are many different ways to say *the*:

Masculine:

*il*
*i*
*lo*
*gli*
*l'*

Feminine:

*la*
*le*
*l'*

Few Italians even write Italian 100% correctly.

A problem with Italian is that meaning is inferred via intonation. If you mess up the intonation of your utterance, you're screwed and will not be understood.

However, there is no case in Italian, as in all of Romance with the exception of Romanian.

Italian is still easier to learn than French - for evidence see the research that shows Italian children learning to write Italian properly by age six, 6-7 years ahead of French children. This is because Italian orthography is quite sensible and coherent, with good sound-symbol correspondence. Nevertheless, the orthography is not as transparent as Spanish's.

Italian has phrasal verbs as in English, but the English ones are a lot more difficult. The Italian ones are usually a lot more clear given the verb and preposition involved, whereas with English, if you have the verb and the preposition, the phrasal verb does not logically follow from their separate meanings. For instance:

*andare fuori  to go + out  = get out*
*andare giù  to go + down = get down*

However, in a similar sense, Italian changes the meaning of verbs via addition of a verbal prefix:

*scrivere*
**a***scrivere*
**de***scrivere*
**pres***crivere*

mettere
**s**mettere
**per**mettere
**sotto**mettere

porre
**pro**porre

portare
**sup**portare

In these cases, you create completely new verbs via the addition of the verbal prefix to the base. Without the prefix, it is a completely

different verb.

Like German and French, Italian forms the auxiliary tense with two different words: *avere* and *essere*. This dual auxiliary system is more difficult than French's and much more difficult than German's.

Italian is somewhat harder to learn than Spanish or Portuguese but not dramatically so. Italian has more irregularities than those two and different ways of forming plurals, including two different ways of forming plurals that can mean different things depending on the context. This is a leftover from the peculiarities of the Latin neutral gender. The rules about when plurals end in *-io* or *-e* are opaque.

In addition, Italian pronouns and verbs are more difficult than in Spanish. Grammar rules in Spanish are simpler and seem more sensible than Italian's. Italian has the pronominal adverbs *ne* and *se*. Their use is not at all intuitive, however, they can be learned with a bit of practice.

Italian pronunciation is a straightforward, but the *ce* and *ci* sounds can be problematic. The only sounds that will give you trouble are *r*, *gl*, and *gn*.

Italian gets a **3 rating**, average difficulty.

Often thought to be an Italian dialect, **Neapolitan** is actually a full language all of its own. Neapolitan is said to be easier than Standard Italian. Unlike Italian, Neapolitan conjugation and the vocative are both quite simple, and any irregularities that exist seem to follow definite patterns.

Neapolitan gets a **2.5 rating**, fairly easy.

# Western Romance

# Gallo-Romance

# Oïl

# French

**French** is pretty easy to learn at a simple level, but it's not easy to get to an advanced level. For instance, the language is full of idioms, many more than your average language, and it's often hard to figure them out.

One problem is pronunciation. There are many nasal vowels, similar to Portuguese. The *eu*, *u* and all of the nasal vowels can be Hell for the learner. There is also a strange uvular *r*. The dictionary does not necessarily help you, as the pronunciation stated in the dictionary is often at odds with what you will find on the street.

There are phenomena called *élision*, *liaison* and *enchainement*, which is similar to sandhi in which vowels elide between words in fast speech. There are actually rules for this sort of thing, but the rules are complicated, and at any rate, for liaisons at least, they are either obligatory, permitted or forbidden depending on the nature of the words being run together, and it is hard to remember which category various word combinations fall under.

The orthography is also difficult since there are many sounds that are written but no longer pronounced, as in English. Also similar to English, orthography does not line up with pronunciation. For instance, there are 13 different ways to spell the *o* sound: *o*, *ot*, *ots*, *os*, *ocs*, *au*, *aux*, *aud*, *auds*, *eau*, *eaux*, *ho* and *ö*. In addition, spoken French and written French can be quite different. Spoken French uses words and phrases such as *c'est foutu - the job will not be done*, and *on* which you might never see in written French.

The English language, having no Language Committee, at least has an excuse for the frequently irrational nature of its spelling. The French have no excuse, since they have a committee that is set up in part to keep the language as orthographically irrational as possible. One of their passions is refusing to change the spelling of words even as

pronunciation changes, which is the opposite of what occurs in any sane spelling reform. So French is, like English, frozen in time, and each one has probably gone as long as the other with no spelling reform.

Furthermore, to make matters worse, the French are almost as prickly about writing properly as they are about speaking properly, and you know how they are about foreigners mangling their language. Despite the many problems of French orthography, there are actually some rules running under the whole mess, and it is quite a bit more sensible than English orthography, which is much more chaotic.

French has a language committee that is always inventing new native French words to keep out the flood of English loans. They have a website up with an official French dictionary showing the proper native coinages to use. Another one for computer technology only is here.

On the plus side, French has a grammar that is neither simple nor difficult; that, combined with a syntax is pretty straightforward, and a Latin alphabet all make it relatively easy to learn for most Westerners. In addition, the English speaker will probably find more instantly recognizable cognates in French than in any other language.

A good case can be made that French is harder to learn than English. Verbs change much more, and it has grammatical gender. There are 15 tenses in the verb, 18 if you include the pluperfect and the Conditional Perfect 2 (now used only in Literary French) and the past imperative (now rarely used). That is quite a few tenses to learn, but Spanish and Portuguese have similar situations. French is also harder to learn than Italian in that French children do not learn to write French properly until age 12-13, six years after Italian children.

Its grammar is much more complicated than Spanish's. Although the subjunctive is more difficult in Spanish than in French, French is much more irregular. Like German, there are two different ways to form the auxiliary tense *to have*. In addition, French uses particles like *y* and *en* that complicate the grammar quite a bit.

French is one of the toughest languages to learn in the Romance family. In many Internet threads about the hardest language to learn, language learners list French as their most problematic language. This is due to the illogical nature of French spelling discussed above such

that the spelling of many French words must be memorized as opposed to applying a general sound-symbol correspondence rule. In addition, French uses both acute and grave accents - ` ´.

French gets a **3.5 rating** for above average difficulty.

## Ibero-Romance

## West-Iberian

## Castilian

**Spanish** is often said to be one of the easiest languages to learn, though this is somewhat controversial. Personally, I've been learning it off and on since age six, and I still have problems, though Spanish speakers say my Spanish is good, but Hispanophones, unlike the French, are generous about these things.

It's quite logical, though the verbs do decline a lot with tense and number, and there are many irregular verbs, similar to French.

Compare English declensions to Spanish declensions of the verb *to read*.

English

*I read*
*He reads*

Spanish

*Yo leo*
*Tu lees*
*El lee*
*Nosotros leemos*
*Vosotros leéis*

*Ellos leen*
*leí*
*leeré*
*leería*
*leyese*
*leyésemos*
*leyéseis*
*¿leísteis?*
*leyéremos*
*leeréis*
*pudísteis haber leído*
*hubiéremos ó hubiésemos leído*

Nevertheless, Romance grammar is much more regular than, say, Polish, as Romance has junked most of the irregularity. Spanish has the good grace to lack case, spelling is a piece of cake, and words are spoken just as they are written. However, there is a sort of case left over in the sense that one uses different pronouns when referring to the direct object (accusative) or indirect object (dative).

Spanish is probably the most regular of the Romance languages, surely more regular than French or Portuguese, and probably more regular than Italian or Romanian. Pluralization is very regular compared to say Italian. There are generally only two plurals, -s and -es, and the rules about when to use one or the other are straightforward. There is only one irregular plural:

*hipérbaton -> hipérbatos*

This is in reference to a literary figure and you would never use this form in day to day speech.

The trilled *r* in Spanish often hard for language learners to make.

There is a distinction in the verb to be with two different forms, *ser* and *estar*. Non-native speakers almost never learn the use these forms as well as a native speaker. The subjunctive is also difficult in Spanish, and L2 learners often struggle with it after decades of learning.

Spanish pronunciation is fairly straightforward, but there are some sounds that cause problems for learners: *j*, *ll*, *ñ*, *g*, and *r*.

One good thing about Spanish is Spanish speakers are generally grateful if you can speak any of their language at all, and are very tolerant of mistakes in L2 Spanish speakers.

Spanish is considered to be easier to learn for English speakers than many other languages, including German. This is because Spanish sentences follow English sentence structure more than German sentences do. Compared to other Romance languages, Spanish one of the easiest to learn. It is quite a bit easier than French, moderately easier than Literary Portuguese, and somewhat easier than Italian.

Nevertheless, Hispanophones say that few foreigners end up speaking like natives. Part of the reason for this is that Spanish is very idiomatic and the various forms of the subjunctive make for a wide range of nuance in expression. Even native speakers make many mistakes when using the subjunctive in conditional sentences. The dialects do differ quite a bit more than most people say they do. The dialects in Latin America and Spain are quite different, and in Latin America, the Argentine and Dominican dialects are very divergent.

Spanish gets **rated 3**, fairly easy.

## Galician-Portuguese

**Portuguese**, like Spanish, is also very easy to learn, though Portuguese pronunciation is harder due to the unusual vowels such as nasal diphthongs and a strange palatal lateral which many English speakers will mistake for an *l*.

Of the nasal diphthongs, *ão* is the hardest to make. In addition, Brazilian (Br) Portuguese has an *r* that sounds like an *h*, and *l* that sounds like a *w* and a *d* that sounds like a *j*, but only some of the time! Fortunately, in European (Eu) Portuguese, all of these sounds sound as you would expect them to.

Portuguese has two *r* sounds, a tapped *r* that is often misconceived as a trilled *r* (present in some British and Irish English dialects) and an uvular *r* which is truly difficult to make. However, this is the typical *r*

sound found in French, German, Danish and Hebrew, so if you have a background in one of those languages, this should be an easy sound. L2 learners not only have a hard time making them but also mix them up sometimes.

You can run many vowels together in Portuguese and still make a coherent sentence. See here:

*É o a ou o b? [Euaoube]*
*Is it (is your answer) a or b?*

That utterance turns an entire sentence into a single verb via run-on vowels, five of them in a row.

Most Portuguese speakers say that Portuguese is harder to learn than Spanish, especially the variety spoken in Portugal. Eu Portuguese elides many vowels and has more sounds per symbol than Br Portuguese does. Portuguese has both nasal and oral vowels, while Spanish has only oral values. In addition, Portuguese has 12 vowel phonemes to Spanish's five.

Portuguese has also retained the archaic subjunctive future which has been lost in many Romance languages.

Try this sentence: *When I am President, I will change the law.*

In Spanish, one uses the future tense as in English:

*Cuando yo soy presidente, voy a cambiar la ley.*

In Portuguese, you use the subjunctive future, lost in all modern Romance languages and lacking in English:

*Quando eu fui presidente, vou mudar a lei.* - literally, *When I may be President, I will possibly change the law.*

The future subjunctive causes a lot of problems for Portuguese

learners and is one of the main ways that it is harder than Spanish.

There is a form called the personal infinitive in Eu Portuguese in which the infinitive is actually inflected that also causes a lot of problems for Portuguese learners.

Personal infinitive:

| | |
|---|---|
| *para eu cantar* | *for me to sing* |
| *para tu cantares* | *for you to sing* |
| *para el cantar* | *for him to sing* |
| *para nos cantarmos* | *for us to sing* |
| *para eles cantarem* | *for them to sing* |

Some sentences with the personal infinitive:

*Ficamos em casa do Joao ao ir***mos** *ao Porto.*
*We are staying at John's when we go to Porto.*

*Comprei-te um livro para o ler***es***.*
*I bought you a book for you to read.*

In addition, when making the present perfect in Spanish, it is fairly easy with the use *have + participle* as in English.

Compare *I have worked*.

In Spanish:

*Yo he trabajado*.

In Portuguese, there is no perfect *to have* nor is there any participle, instead, present perfect is formed via a conjugation that varies among verbs:

*Eu trabalhei* - because *Eu hei trabalhado* makes no sense in Portuguese.

Portuguese still uses the pluperfect tense quite a bit, a tense that gone out or is heading out of most IE languages. The pluperfect is used a lot less now in Br Portuguese, but it is still very widely used in Eu Portuguese. The pluperfect is used to discuss a past action that took place before another past action. An English translation might be:

*He had already gone* by the time she showed up.

The italicized part would be the equivalent to the pluperfect in English.

*O pássaro voara quando o gato pulou sobre ele para tentar comê-lo.*
*The bird had (already) flown away when the cat jumped over it trying to eat it.*

Even Br Portuguese has its difficulties centering around diglossia. It is written in 1700's Eu Portuguese, but in speech, the Brazilian vernacular is used. Hence:

*I love you*

*Amo-te* or *Amo-o* [standard, written]
*Eu te amo* or *Eu amo você* [spoken]

*We saw them*

*Vimo-los* [standard, written]
*A gente viu eles* [spoken]

Even Eu Portuguese native speakers often make mistakes in Portuguese grammar when speaking. Young people writing today in Portuguese are said to be notorious for not writing or speaking it properly. The pronunciation is so complicated and difficult that even foreigners residing in Portugal for a decade never seem to get it quite right. In addition, Portuguese grammar is unimaginably complicated. There are probably more exceptions than there are rules, and even native speakers have issues with Portuguese grammar.

Portuguese gets a **3 rating**, average difficulty.

## Eastern Romance

Surprisingly enough, **Romanian** is said to be one of the harder Romance languages to speak or write properly. Even Romanians often get it wrong. One strange thing about Romanian is that the articles are attached to the noun as suffixes. In all the rest of Romance, articles are free words that precede the noun.

English *telephone the telephone*

Romanian *telefon telefonul*

Romanian is the only Romance language with case. There are five cases - nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, vocative - but vocative is not often use, and the other four cases combine as two cases: nominative/accusative and dative/genitive merge as single cases.

Nominative-Accusative *aeroportul*

Genitive-Dative *aeroportului*

The genitive is hard for foreigners to learn as is the formation of plurals. The ending changes for no apparent reason when you pluralize a noun and there are also sound changes:

*brad* (singular)
*brazi* (plural)

Many native speakers have problems with plurals and some of the declensions. Unlike the rest of Romance which has only two genders, masculine and feminine, Romanian has three genders - masculine, feminine and neuter (the neuter is retained from Latin). However, neuter gender is realized on the surface as masculine in the singular and feminine in the plural, unlike languages such as Russian where neuter gender is an entirely different gender.

The pronunciation is not terribly difficult, but it is hard to learn at first. For some odd reason, the Latinization is considered to be terrible.

Romanian is harder to learn than Spanish or Italian and possibly harder than French. However, you can have odd sentences with nothing but vowels as in Maori.

*Aia-i oaia ei, o iau eu?*
*That's her sheep, should I take it?*

It may have the most difficult grammar in Romance. Romanian has considerable Slavic influence.

Romanian gets a **3 rating**, average difficulty.

## Germanic

## West Germanic

## Anglo–Frisian

## Anglic

People often say that **English** is easy to learn, but that is deceptive. For one thing, English has anywhere from 500,000-1 million words

(said to be twice as much as any other language - but there are claims that Dutch and Arabic each have 4 million words), and the number increases by the day. Furthermore, most people don't understand more than 50,000, and a majority might only understand 30,000 words. Yet your average person only uses 5,000 at most.

Actually, the average American or Brit uses a mere 2,500 words. As we might expect, our cultivated Continentals in Europe, such as Spaniards and French, probably have twice the regular vocabulary of English speakers and far more colloquial expressions.

In addition, verbal phrases or phrasal verbs are a nightmare. Phrasal verbs are probably left over from "separable verbs" in German. In most of the rest of IE, these become affixes as in Latin Latin *cum-*, *ad-*, *pro-*, *in-*, *ex-*, etc.. In many cases, phrasal verbs can have more than 10 different antagonistic meanings.

Here is a list of 123 phrasal verbs using the preposition *up* after a verb:

*Back up* - to go in reverse, often in a vehicle, or to go back over something previously dealt with that was poorly understood in order to understand it better.

*Be up* - to be in a waking state after having slept. *I've been up for three hours.* Also to be ready to do something challenging. *Are you up for it?*

*Beat up* - to defeat someone thoroughly in a violent physical fight.

*Bid up* - to raise the price of something, usually at an auction, by calling out higher and higher bids.

*Blow up* - to explode an explosive or for a social situation to become violent and volatile.

*Bone up* - to study hard.

*Book up* - all of the booking seats have been filled for some entertainment or excursion.

*Bottle up* - to contain feelings until they are at the point of exploding.

*Break up* - to break into various pieces, or to end a relationship, either personal or between entitles, also to split a large entity, like a large company or a state.

*Bruise up* - to receive multiple bruises, often serious ones.

*Brush up* - to go over a previously learned skill.

*Build up* - to build intensively in an area, such as a town or city, from a previously less well-developed state.

*Burn up* - burn completely or to be made very angry.

*Bust up* - to burst out in laughter.

*Buy up* - to buy all or most all of something.

*Call up* - to telephone someone. Or to be ordered to appear in the military. *The army called up all males aged 18-21 and ordered them to show up at the nearest recruiting office.*

*Catch up* - to reach a person or group that one had lagged behind earlier, or to take care of things, often hobbies, that had been put off by lack of time.

*Chat up* - to talk casually with a goal in mind, usually seduction or at least flirtation.

*Cheer up* - to change from a downcast mood to a more positive one.

*Chop up* - to cut into many, often small, pieces.

*Clam up* - to become very quiet suddenly and not say a thing.

*Clean up* - to make an area thoroughly tidy or to win completely and thoroughly.

*Clear up* - for a storm to dissipate, for a rash to go away, for a confusing matter to become understandable.

*Close up* - to close, also to end business hours for a public business.

*Come up* - to approach closely, to occur suddenly or to overflow.

*Cook up* - to prepare a meal or to configure a plan, often of a sly, ingenious or devious nature. *They cooked up a scheme to swindle the boss.*

*Crack up* - to laugh, often heartily.

*Crank up* - elevate the volume.

*Crawl up* - to crawl inside something.

*Curl up* - to rest in a curled body position, either alone or with another being.

*Cut up* - to shred or to make jokes, often of a slapstick variety.

*Do up* - apply makeup to someone, often elaborately.

*Dream up* - to imagine a creative notion, often an elaborate one.

*Dress up* - to dress oneself in formal attire.

*Drive up* - to drive towards something, and then stop, or to raise the price of something by buying it intensively.

*Drum up* - to charge someone with wrongdoing, usually criminal, usually by a state actor, usually for false reasons.

*Dry up* - to dessicate.

*Eat up* - implies eating something ravenously or finishing the entire meal without leaving anything left.

*End up* - to arrive at some destination after a long winding, often convoluted journey either in space or in time.

*Face up* - to quit avoiding your problems and meet them head on.

*Feel up* - to grope someone sexually.

*Get up* - to awaken or rise from a prone position.

*Give up* - to surrender, in war or a contest, or to stop doing something trying or unpleasant that is yielding poor results, or to die, as in *give up the ghost*.

*Grow up* - to attain an age or maturity or to act like a mature person, often imperative.

*Hang up* - to place on a hanger or a wall, to end a phone call.

*Hike up* - to pull your clothes up when they are drifting down on your body.

*Hit up* - to visit someone casually or to ask for a favor or gift, usually small amounts of money.

*Hold up* - to delay, to ask someone ahead of you to wait, often imperative. Also a robbery, usually with a gun and a masked robber.

*Hook up* - to have a casual sexual encounter or to meet casually for a social encounter, often in a public place; also to connect together a mechanical device or plug something in.

*Hurry up* - imperative, usually an order to quit delaying and join the general group or another person in some activity, often when they are leaving to go to another place.

*Keep up* - to maintain on a par with the competition without falling behind.

*Kiss up* - to mend a relationship after a fight.

*Knock up* - to impregnate.

*Lay up* - to be sidelined due to illness or injury for a time.

*Let up* - to ease off of someone or something, for a storm to dissipate, to stop attacking someone or s.t.

*Lick up* - to consume all of a liquid.

*Light up* - to set s.t. on fire or to smile suddenly and broadly.

*Lighten up* - to reduce the downcast or hostile seriousness of the mood of a person or setting.

*Listen up* - imperative - to order someone to pay attention, often with threats of aggression if they don't comply.

*Live up* - to enjoy life.

*Lock up* - to lock securely, often locking various locks, or to imprison, or for an object or computer program to be frozen or jammed and unable to function.

*Look up* - to search for an item of information in some sort of a database, such as a phone book or dictionary. Also to admire someone.

*Make up* - to make amends, to apply cosmetics to one's face or to invent a story.

*Man up* - to elevate oneself to manly behaviors when one is slacking and behaving in an unmanly fashion.

*Mark up* - to raise the price of s.t.

*Measure up* - in a competition, for an entity to match the competition.

*Meet up* - to meet someone or a group for a get meeting or date of some sort.

*Mess up* - to fail or to confuse and disarrange s.t. so much that it is bad need or reparation.

*Mix up* - to confuse, or to disarrange contents in a scattered fashion so that it does not resemble the original.

*Mop up* - mop a floor or finish off the remains of an enemy army or finalize a military operation.

*Move up* - to elevate the status of a person or entity in competition with other entities- *to move up in the world*.

*Open up* - when a person has been silent about something for a long time, as if holding a secret, finally reveals the secret and begins talking.

*Own up* - to confess to one's sins under pressure and reluctantly.

*Pass up* - to miss an opportunity, often a good one.

*Patch up* - to put together a broken thing or relationship.

*Pay up* - to pay, usually a debt, often imperative to demand payment of a debt, to pay all of what one owes so you don't owe anymore.

*Pick up* - to grasp an object and lift it higher, to seduce someone sexually or to acquire a new skill, usually rapidly.

*Play up* - to dramatize.

*Pop up* - for s.t. to appear suddenly, often out of nowhere.

*Put up* - to hang, to tolerate, often grudgingly, or to put forward a new image.

*Read up* - to read intensively as in studying.

*Rev up* - to turn the RPM's higher on a stationary engine.

*Ring up* - to telephone someone or to charge someone on a cash register.

*Rise up* - for an oppressed group to arouse and fight back against their oppressors.

*Roll up* - to roll s.t. into a ball, to drive up to someone in a vehicle or

to arrest all the members of an illegal group. *The police rolled up that Mafia cell quickly.*

*Run up* - to tally a big bill, often foolishly or approach s.t. Quickly.

*Shake up* - to upset a paradigm, to upset emotionally.

*Shape up* - usually imperative command ordering someone who is disorganized or slovenly to live life in a more orderly and proper fashion.

*Shoot up* - to inject, usually illegal drugs, or to fire many projectiles into a place with a gun.

*Show up* - to appear somewhere, often unexpectedly.

*Shut up* - to silence, often imperative, fighting words.

*Sit up* - to sit upright.

*Slip up* - to fail.

*Speak up* - to begin speaking after listening for a while, often imperative, a request for a silent person to say what they wish to say.

*Spit up* - to vomit, usually describing a child vomiting up its food.

*Stand up* - to go from a sitting position to a standing one quickly.

*Start up* - to initialize an engine or a program, to open a new business to go back to something that had been terminated previously, often a fight; a recrudescence.

*Stay up* - to not go to bed.

*Stick up* - to rob someone, usually a street robbery with a weapon, generally a gun.

*Stir up* - stir rapidly, upset a calm surrounding or scene or upset a paradigm.

*Stop up* - to block the flow of liquids with some object(s).

*Straighten up* - to go from living a dissolute or criminal life to a clean, law abiding one.

*Suck up* - to ingratiate oneself, often in an obsequious fashion.

*Suit up* - to get dressed in a uniform, often for athletics.

*Sweep up* - to arrest all the members of an illegal group, often a criminal gang.

*Take up* - to cohabit with someone - *She has taken up with him*. Or to develop a new skill, to bring something to a higher elevation, to cook something at a high heat to where it is assimilated.

*Talk up* - to try to convince someone of something by discussing it dramatically and intensively.

*Tear up* - to shred.

*Think up* - to conjure up a plan, often an elaborate or creative one.

*Throw up* - to vomit.

*Touch up* - to apply the final aspects of a work nearly finished.

*Trip up* - to stumble mentally over s.t. confusing.

*Turn up* - to increase volume or to appear suddenly somewhere.

*Vacuum up* - to vacuum.

*Use up* - to finish s.t. completely so there is no more left.

*Wait up* - to ask other parties to wait for someone who is coming in a hurry.

*Wake up* - to awaken.

*Walk up* - to approach someone or something.

*Wash up* - to wash.

*Whip up* - to cook a meal quickly or for winds to blow wildly.

*Work up* - to exercise heavily, until you sweat to work up a sweat. Or to generate s.t. a report or s.t. of that nature done rather hurriedly in a seat of the pants and unplanned fashion. *We quickly worked up a formula for dealing with the matter.*

*Wrap up* - To finish something up, often something that is taking too long. *Come on, let us wrap this up and getting it over with.* Also, to bring to a conclusion that ties the ends together. *The story wraps up with a scene where they all get together and sing a song.*

*Write up* - often to write a report of reprimand or a violation. *The officer wrote him for having no tail lights.*

Here are phrasal verbs using the preposition *down*:

*Be down* - to be ready to ready to do something daring, often s.t.

bad, illegal or dangerous, such as a fight or a crime. *Are you down?*

*Burn down* - reduce s.t. to ashes, like a structure.

*Get down* - to have fun and party, or to lie prone and remain there. *Get down on the floor.*

*Drink down* to consume all of s.t.

*Kick down* - Drug slang meaning to contribute your drugs to a group drug stash so others can consume them with you, to share your drugs with others. Often used in a challenging sense.

*Party down* - to have fun and party

*Pat down* - to frisk.

*Take down* - to tackle.

*Cook down* - to reduce the liquid content in a cooked item.

*Run down* - to run over something, to review a list or to attack someone verbally for a long time.

*Play down* - to de-emphasize.

*Write down* - to write on a sheet of paper

There are figures of speech and idioms everywhere (some estimate that up to 20% of casual English speech is idiomatic), and it seems impossible to learn them all. In fact, few second language learners get all the idioms down pat.

The spelling is insane and hardly follows any rules at all. The English spelling system in some ways is frozen at about the year 1500 or so.

The pronunciation has changed but the spelling has not. Careful studies have shown that English-speaking children take longer to read than children speaking other languages (Finnish, Greek and various Romance and other Germanic languages) due to the difficulty of the spelling system. Romance languages were easier to read than Germanic ones.

This may be why English speakers are more likely to be diagnosed dyslexic than speakers of other languages. The dyslexia still exists if you speak a language with good sound-symbol correspondence, but it's covered up so much by the ease of the orthography that it seems invisible, and the person can often function well. But for a dyslexic, trying to read English is like walking into a minefield.

Letters can make many different sounds, a consequence of the insane spelling system. A single sound can be spelled in many different ways: *e* can be spelled *e*, *ea*, *ee*, *ei*, *eo*, *ey*, *ae*, *i*, *ie*, and *y*. The *k* sound can spelled as *c*, *cc*, *ch*, *ck*, *k*, *x*, and *q*.

The rules governing the use of the indefinite, definite and zero article are opaque and possibly don't even exist. There are synonyms for almost every word in a sentence, and the various shades of meaning can be difficult to discern. In addition, quite a few words have many different meanings. There are strange situations like *read* and *read*, which are pronounced differently and mean two different things.

English word derivation is difficult to get your mind around because of the dual origins of the English language in both Latin/French and German.

*See* and *hear* and *perceptible* and *audible* mean the same thing, but the first pair is derived from German, and the second pair is derived from Latin.

English word derivation is irregular due for the same reason:

*assume* - *assumption* (Latin)
*child* - *childish* (German)
*build* - *building* (German)

In English we have at least 12 roots with the idea of two in them:

*two*
*twenty*
*twelve*
*second*
*double*
*dual*
*twin*
*pair*
*half*
*both*
*dupl-*
*semi-*
*hemi*
*bi-*
*di-*

However, English regular verbs generally have only a few forms in their normal paradigm. In this arrangement, there are only five forms of the verb in general use for the overwhelming majority of verbs:

| | |
|---|---|
| present except 3rd singular | *steal* |
| 3rd person singular | *steals* |
| progressive | *stealing* |
| past | *stole* |
| perfect | *stolen* |

Even a language like Spanish has many more basic forms than that. However, coming from an inflected language, the marking of only the 3rd singular and not marking anything else may seem odd.

The complicated part of English verbs is not their inflection - minimal as it is - but instead lies in the large number of irregular verbs.

There is also the oddity of the 2nd person being the same in both the singular and the plural - *you*. Some dialects such as US Southern English do mark the plural - *you all* or *y'all*.

English prepositions are notoriously hard, and few second language

learners get them down right because they seem to obey no discernible rules.

One problem that English learners complain of is differential uses of *have*.

1. Perfect tense. *I* **have** *done it.*
2. Deontic (must). *I* **have** *to do it.*
3. Causative. *I* **had** *it done.*

While English seems simple at first - past tense is easy, there is little or no case, no grammatical gender, little mood, etc., that can be quite deceptive. In European countries like Croatia, it's hard to find a person who speaks English with even close to native speaker competence.

There are quite a few English dialects - over 100 have been recorded in London alone.

The problem with English is that it's a mess! There are languages with very easy grammatical rules like Indonesian and languages with very hard grammatical rules like Arabic. English is one of those languages that is simply chaotic. There are rules, but there are exceptions everywhere and exceptions to the exceptions. Grammatically, it's disaster area. It's hard to know where to start.

However, it is often said that English has no grammatical rules. Even native speakers make this comment because that is how English seems due to its highly irregular nature. Most English native speakers, even highly educated ones, can't name one English grammatical rule. Just to show you that English does have rules though, I will list some of them.

*Indicates an ungrammatical form.

Adjectives appear before the noun in noun phrases:

*Small dogs barked*.

**Dogs small barked*.

Adjectives are numerically invariant:

*the small dog*

*the small dogs*
*The dog is small.*
*The dogs are small.*

Intensifiers appear before both attributive and predicative adjectives:

*The very small dog barked.*
**The small very dog barked.*
*The dog was very small.*
**The dog was small very.*

Attributive adjectives can have complements:

*The dog was scared.*
*The dog was scared of cats.*

But predicative adjectives cannot:

*The scared dog barked.*
**The scared of cats dog barked.*

Articles, quantifiers, etc. appear before the adjective (and any intensifier) in a noun phrase:

*The very small dog barked.*
**Very the small dog barked.*
**Very small the dog barked.*

*Every very small dog barked.*
**Very every small dog barked.*
**Very small every dog barked.*

Relative clauses appear after the noun in a noun phrase:

*The dog that barked.*
**The that barked dog.*

The progressive verb form is the bare form with the suffix *-ing*, even for the most irregular verbs in the language:

*being*
*having*
*doing*
**wasing*
**aring*
**aming*

The infinitive verb form is *to* followed by the bare form, even for the most irregular verbs in the language:

*to be*
*to have*
*to do*
**to was*
**to are*
**to am*

The imperative verb form is the bare form, even for the most irregular verb in the language:

*Be!*
*Have!*

*Do!*

**Was!*
**Are!*
**Am!*

All 1st person present, 2nd person present, and plural present verb forms are equivalent to the bare form, except for *to be*.

All past tense verb forms of a given verb are the same regardless of person and number, except for *to be*.

Question inversion is optional:

*You are leaving?*
*Are you leaving?*

But when inversion does occur in a wh-question, a wh-phrase is required to be fronted:

*You're seeing what?*
*What are you seeing?*

**Are you seeing what?*

Wh-fronting is required to affect an entire noun phrase, not just the wh-word:

*You are going to which Italian restaurant?*
*Which Italian restaurant are you going to?*

**Which are you going to Italian restaurant?*
**Which Italian are you going to restaurant?*
**Which restaurant are you going to Italian?*

Wh-fronting only happens once, never more:

*What are you buying from which store*
*Which store are you buying what from?*

**What which store are you buying from?*
**Which store what are you buying from?*

The choice of auxiliary verb in compound past sentences does not depend on the choice of main verb:

*I have eaten.*
*I have arrived.*

**I am eaten.*
**I am arrived.*

cf. French

*J'ai mangé.*
*Je suis arrivé.*

English can be seen as an inverted pyramid in terms of ease of learning. The basics are easy, but it gets a lot more difficult as you progress in your learning.

While it is relatively easy to speak it well enough to be more or less understandable most of the time, speaking it correctly is often not possible for a foreigner even after 20 years of regular use.

English only gets a **2.5 rating**, somewhat difficult.

## High German

**German's** status is controversial. It's long been considered hard to learn, but many learn it fairly easily.

Pronunciation is straightforward, but there are some problems with the *müde*, the *Ach*, and the two *ch* sounds in *Geschichte*. Although the first one is really an *sch* instead of a *ch*, English speakers lack an

*sch*, so they will just see that as a *ch*. Further, there are specific rules about when to use the *ss* (or *sz* as Germans say) or hard *s*. The *r* in German is quite strange, and of common languages, only French has a similar *r*. The *ç*, *χ* and ü sounds can be hard to make. Consonant clusters like *Herku***nftsw***örterbuch* or *He***rbstpfl**anze can be be difficult. German permits the hard to pronounce *shp* and *shtr* consonant clusters. Of the vowels, *ö* and *ü* seem to cause the most problems.

German grammar is quite complex. It recently scored as one of the weirdest languages in Europe on a study, and it also makes it onto worst grammars lists. The main problem is that everything is irregular. Nouns, plurals, determiners, adjectives, superlatives, verbs, participles - they are all irregular. It seems that everything in the language is irregular.

There are six different forms of *the* depending on the noun case:

*der*
*die*
*das*
*den*
*dem*
*des*

but 16 different slots to put the six forms in, and the gender system is irrational. In a more basic sense and similar to Danish, there are three basic forms of *the*:

*der*
*die*
*das*

Each one goes with a particular noun, and it's not very clear what the rules are.

One problem with German syntax is that the verb, verbs or parts of verbs doesn't occur until the end of the sentence. This sentence structure is known as V2 syntax, and it is quite alien for English

speakers. There are verbal prefixes, and they can be modified in all sorts of ways that change meanings in subtle ways. There are dozens of different declension types for verbs, similar to Russian and Irish. There are also quite a few irregular verbs that do not fit into any of the paradigms.

German also has *Schachtelsätze*, box clauses, which are like clauses piled into other clauses. In addition, subclauses use SOV word order. Whereas in Romance languages you can often throw words together into a sentence and still be understood if not grammatical, in German, you must learn the sentence structure - it is mandatory and there is no way around it. The syntax is very rigid but at least very regular.

German case is also quite regular. The case exceptions can be almost counted on one hand. However, look at the verb:

*helfen help*

in which the direct object is in dative rather than the expected absolutive.

An example of German case (and case in general) is here:

*The leader of the group gives the boy a dog.*

In German, the sentence is case marked with the four different German cases:

*Der Führer* (nominative)
*der Gruppe* (genitive)
*gibt dem Jungen* (dative)
*einen Hund* (accusative).

There are three genders, masculine, feminine and neutral. Yet it is difficult to tell which gender any particular noun is based on looking at it, for instance, *petticoat* is masculine! Any given noun inflects via the four cases and the three genders. Furthermore, the genders change between masculine and feminine in the same noun for no logical

reason. Gender seems to be one of the main problems that German learners have with the language. Figuring out which word gets which gender must simply be memorized as there are no good clues.

Phonology also changes strangely as the number of the noun changes:

*Haus* *house* (singular)
*Haeuser* *houses* (plural with umlaut)

But to change the noun to a diminutive, you add *-chen*:

*Haueschen - little house* (singular, yet has the umlaut of the plural)

This is part of a general pattern in Germanic languages of roots changing the vowel as verbs, adjectives and nouns with common roots change from one into the other.

For instance, in English we have the following vowel changes in these transformed roots:

*foul filth*

*tell tale*

*long length*

*full fill*

*hot heat*

*do does*

Much of this has gone out of English, but it is still very common in German. Dutch is in between English and German.

German:

For *sick*, we have:

| | |
|---|---|
| *krank* | *sick* |
| *kränker* | *sicker* |
| *kränklich* | *sickly* |
| *krankhaft* | *pathological* |
| *kranken an* | *to suffer from* |
| *kränken* | *to hurt* |
| *kränkeln* | *to be ailing* |
| *erkranken* | *to fall ill* |

For *good*, we have:

| | |
|---|---|
| *gut* | *good* |
| *Güte* | *goodness* |
| *Gut* | *a good* |
| *Güter* | *goods* |
| *gütig* | *kind* |
| *gütlich* | *amicable* |

German also has a complicated preposition system.

German also has a vast vocabulary, the fourth largest in the world. This is either positive or negative depending on your viewpoint. Language learners often complain about learning languages with huge vocabularies, but as a native English speaker, I'm happy to speak a language with a million words. There's a word for just about everything you want to say about anything, and then some!

On the plus side, word formation is quite regular.

*Pollution* is *Umweltverschmutzung*. It consists, logically, of two words, *Umwelt* and *Verschmutzung*, which mean *environment* and *dirtying*.

In English, you have three words, *environment*, *dirtying* and *pollution*, the third one, the combination of the first two, has no relation to its semantic roots in the first two words.

Nevertheless, this has its problems, since it's not simple to figure out how the words are stuck together into bigger words, and meanings of morphemes can take years to figure out.

German has phrasal verbs as in English, but the meaning is often somewhat clear if you take the morphemes apart and look at their literal meanings. For instance:

*vorschlagen - to suggest* parses out to *er schlägt vor - to hit forth*

whereas in English you have phrasal verbs like *to get over* with which even when separated out, don't make sense literally.

German, like French and Italian, has two auxiliary tenses - *habe* and *bin*. However, their use is quite predictable and the tenses are not inflected so the dual auxiliary is easier in German than in French or especially Italian.

Reading German is actually much easier than speaking it, since to speak it correctly, you need to memorize not only genders but also adjectives and articles.

German is not very inflected, and the inflection that it does take is more regular than many other languages. Furthermore, German orthography is phonetic, and there are no silent letters.

German, like Dutch, is being flooded with English loans. While this helpful to the English speaker, others worry that the language is at risk of turning into English.

Learning German can be seen as a pyramid. It is very difficult to grasp the basics, but once you do that, it gets increasingly easy as the language follows relatively simple rules and many words are created from other words via compound words, prefixes and suffixes.

Rating German is hard to do. It doesn't seem to deserve to a very high rating, but it makes a lot of people's "hardest language you ever tried to learn" list for various reasons.

German gets a **3.5 rating**, moderately difficult.

# Low Franconian

## Dutch

While **Dutch** syntax is no more difficult than English syntax, Dutch is still harder to learn than English due to the large number of rules used in both speaking and writing. The Dutch say that few foreigners learn to speak Dutch well. Part of the problem is that some words have no meaning at all in isolation (meaning is only derived via a phrase or sentence).

Word order is somewhat difficult because it is quite rigid. In particular, there are complex and very strange rules about the order of verbs in verbal clusters. It helps if you know German as the rule order is similar, but Dutch word order is harder than German word order. Foreigners often seem to get the relatively lax Dutch rules about word order wrong in long sentences.

Verbs can be difficult. For instance, there are no verbs *get* and *move*. Instead, *get* and *move* each have about a dozen different verbs in Dutch. A regular Dutch verb has six different forms.

Dutch spelling is difficult, and most Dutch people cannot even spell Dutch correctly. There are only two genders - common and neuter - as opposed to three in German - feminine, neuter and masculine. In Dutch, the masculine and feminine merged in the common gender. But most Dutch speakers cannot tell you the gender of any individual word, in part because there are few if any clues to the gender of any given noun.

There are remnants of the three gender system in that the Dutch still use masculine/feminine for some nouns. In the Netherlands now, most Dutch speakers are simply using masculine (common) for most nouns other than things that are obviously feminine like the words mother and sister.

However, in Belgium, where people speak Flemish, not Dutch, most people still know the genders of words. Not only that but the 3-gender system with masculine, feminine and neuter remains in place in Flemish. In addition, in Flemish, the definite article still makes an obvious distinction between masculine and feminine, so it is easy to figure out the gender of a noun:

*ne man*, *nen boom*, *nen ezel*, *nen banaan* (masculine)
*een vrouw*, *een koe*, *een wolk*, *een peer* (feminine)

In addition, most Dutch speakers cannot tell you what pronoun to use in the 3rd person singular when conjugating a verb.

This is because there are two different systems in use for conjugating the 3 sing.

The basic paradigm is:

*hij* *he*
*zij (ze)* *she*
*het* *it*

System 1

male persons *hij*
female persons *zij*
neuter words *het*
animals *hij*, unless noun = neuter
objects *hij*, " "
abstractions *zij*, " "
substances *hij*, " "

System 2

male persons *hij*
female persons *zij*
all animals *hij*

| | |
|---|---|
| all objects | *hij* |
| all abstractions | *zij* |
| all substances | *het* |

For instance, *melk* is a common noun. Under system 1, it would be *hij*. But under system 2, it would be *het* because it is a substance.

The *er* word is tricky in Dutch. Sometimes it is translated as English *there*, but more often then not it is simply not translated in English translations because there is no good translation for it. There are two definite articles, *de* and *het*, and they are easily confused.

Dutch has something called modal particles, the meanings of which are quite obscure.

Some say Dutch is irregular, but the truth is that more than Dutch has a multitude of very complex rules, rules that are so complicated that is hard to even figure them out, much less understand them. Nevertheless, Dutch has 200 irregular verbs.

In some respects, Dutch is a more difficult language than English. For instance, in English, one can simply say:

*The tree is in the garden.*

But in Dutch (and also in German) you can't say that. You have to be more specific. What is the tree doing in the garden? Is it standing there? Is it lying on the grass? You have to say not only that the tree is in the garden, but what it is doing there.

In Dutch, you need to say:

*Daar ligt een boom in de tuin.*
*The tree is standing in the garden.*

*Daar ligt een boom in de tuin.*
*The tree is lying in the garden.*

Dutch pronunciation is pretty easy, but the *ui*, *eu*, *ij*, *au*, *ou*, *eeuw* and *uu* sounds can be hard to make. Dutch speakers say only Germans learn to pronounce the *ui* correctly.

Dutch was listed as one of the top weirdest languages in Europe in a recent study.

Dutch is almost being buried in a flood of English loans. While this helps the English speaker, others worry that the Dutch nature of the language is at risk.

Dutch seems to be easier to learn than German. Dutch has fewer cases, thus fewer articles and and adjective endings. There are two main ways of pluralizing in Dutch: adding *-'s* and adding *-en*. Unfortunately, in German, things are much more complex than that. Dutch has only two genders (and maybe just a trace of a third) but German definitely has three genders. Verb conjugation is quite similar in both languages, but it is a bit easier in Dutch. Word order is the same: complex in both languages. Both languages are equally complex in terms of pronunciation. Both have the difficult *ø* and *y* vowels.

Dutch gets a **3 rating**, average difficulty.

**Afrikaans** is just Dutch simplified.

Where Dutch has 200 irregular verbs, Afrikaans has only six. A Dutch verb has six different forms, but Afrikaans has only two. Afrikaans has two fewer tense than Dutch. Dutch has two genders, and Afrikaans has only one. Surely Afrikaans ought to be easier to learn than Dutch.

Afrikaans gets a **2 rating**, very easy to learn.

## North Germanic

## West Scandinavian

**Icelandic** is very hard to learn, much harder than Norwegian, German or Swedish. Part of the problem is pronunciation. The grammar is harder than German grammar, and there are almost no Latin-based words in it. The vocabulary is quite archaic. Modern loans

are typically translated into Icelandic equivalents rather than borrowed fully into Icelandic.

There are four cases: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive - as in German - and there are many exceptions to the case rules, or "quirky case," as it is called. In quirky case, case can be marked on verbs, prepositions and and adjectives. The noun morphology system is highly irregular. Articles can be postfixed and inflected and added to the noun. In fact, Icelandic in general is highly irregular, not just the nouns.

Verbs are modified for tense, mood, person and number, as in many other IE languages (this is almost gone from English). There are up to ten tenses, but most of these are formed with auxiliaries as in English. Icelandic also modifies verbs for voice - active, passive and medial. Furthermore, there are four different kinds of verbs - strong, weak, reduplicating and irregular, with several conjugation categories in each division. Many verbs just have to be memorized.

Adjectives decline in an astounding 130 different ways, but many of these forms are the same.

The language is generally SVO, but since there is so much case-marking, in poetry all possibilities - SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV and OVS - are allowed. There is also something odd called "long distance reflexives," which I do not understand.

In addition, Icelandic has the typical Scandinavian problem of a nutty orthography.

Icelandic verbs are very regular but the sounds change so much, especially the vowels, that the whole situation gets confusing pretty fast. In addition, there are three different verbal paradigms depending on the ending of the verb:

*-er*
*-ir*
*-re*

Icelandic verbs are commonly cited as some of the hardest verb systems around, at least in Europe. Even Icelandic people say their own verbs are difficult.

Icelandic has a voiceless lateral. This can be a hard sound to make for many learners, especially in the middle of a word. In addition, there are two alveolar trills (the rolled *r* sound in Spanish), and one of them is voiced while the other is voiceless. Learners say they have problems with both of these sounds. In addition to voiceless *l*'s and *r*'s, Icelandic also has four voiceless nasals.

There are also contrasts between aspirated and nonaspirated stops including the odd palatal stops $c^h$ and *c*. In addition, there is a strange voiceless palatal fricative *ç* (similar to the *h* in English *huge*). In addition, Icelandic has a hard to pronounce four consonant cluster *strj-* that occurs at the beginning of a word.

Icelandic does have the advantage of being one of the few major languages with no significant dialects, so this is a plus. Icelandic has been separated from the rest of Scandinavian for 1,100 years. Icelandic is spoken over a significant region, much of which has inhabited places separated by large expanses of uninhabitable land such as impassable glaciers, volcanoes, lava flows, geysers and almost no food. How Icelandic managed to not develop dialects in this situation is mysterious.

Icelandic has traditionally been considered to be one of the hardest languages on Earth to learn. It may be even more complex than Czech and Polish, but since it is a Germanic language, it should be easier for English speakers to learn than the other two.

Icelandic gets a **5 rating**, extremely difficult to learn.

**Faroese** is said to be even harder to learn than Icelandic, with some very strange vowels not found in other North Germanic languages.

Faroese has strong, weak and irregular verbs. It also has a strange supine tense.

The Faroese orthography is as irrational as Icelandic's. There are so many rules to learn to be able to write Faroese properly. Faroese, like Icelandic, prefers to coin new words rather than borrow words wholesale into its language. Therefore the English speaker will not see a lot of obvious borrowings to help them out. Some argue against this nativization process, but maybe it is better than being buried in English loans like German and Dutch are at the moment.

*computer* *telda* (derived from *at telja - to count*. Icelandic has a similar term.

*helicopter* *tyrla* (derived from *tyril - a spinning tool for making wool or loom*.)

*music* *tónleikur*

*pocket calculator* *telduhvølpur* (Lit. *computer puppy*), *roknimaskina* (Lit. *calculating machine*)

Faroese has the advantage of having no verbal aspect, and verbal declension does not differ much according to person. However, Faroese has a case system like Icelandic.

Faroese gets a **5 rating**,extremely difficult.

**Norwegian** is fairly easy to learn, and Norwegian is sometimes touted as the easiest language on Earth to learn for an English speaker.

This is confusing because Danish is described below as a more difficult language to learn, and critics say that Danish and Norwegian are the same, so they should have equal difficulty. But only one Norwegian writing system is almost the same as Danish the Danish writing system. Danish pronunciation is quite a bit different from Norwegian, and this is where the problems come in.

Nevertheless, Norwegian dialects can be a problem. Foreigners get off the plane having learned a bit of Norwegian and are immediately struck by the strangeness of the multiplicity of dialects, which for the most part are easy for Norwegians to understand, but can be hard for foreigners.

There is also the problematic *en* and *et* alternation, as discussed with Danish. Norwegian has an irrational orthographic system, like Swedish, with silent letters and many insensible sounds, both consonants and vowels. It has gone a long time without a spelling reform. It has the additional orthographic issues of two different writing systems and a multitude of dialects. Norwegian, like Danish

and Swedish, has a huge vowel inventory, one of the larger ones on Earth. It can be confusing and difficult to make all of those odd vowel sounds: 18 contrasting simple vowels, nine long and nine short.

Norwegian has very little inflection in its words, but the syntax is very difficult. Norwegian also has "tonemes" which distinguish between homophones.

*tanken* *the tank*
*tanken* *the thought*

have two different meanings, even though the stress and pronunciation are the same. The words are distinguished by a toneme.

For some reason, Norwegian scored very high on a study of weirdest languages on Earth, but Swedish and Danish also got high scores.

However, Norwegian is a very regular language.

Norwegian gets a **2 rating**, moderately easy to learn.

## East Scandinavian

**Danish** is a harder language to learn than one might think. It's not that hard to read or even write, but it's quite hard to speak. However, like English, Danish has a non-phonetic orthography, so this can be problematic. It has gone a long time without a spelling reform, so there are many silent letters and sounds, both vowels and consonants, that make no sense. Danish makes it on lists of most irrational orthographies of all.

In addition, there are *d* words where the *d* is silent and other *d* words where it is pronounced, and though the rules are straightforward, it's often hard for foreigners to get the hang of this. The *d* in *hund* is silent, for instance. In addition, the *b*, *d*, and *g* sounds are somehow voiceless in many environments, which must be a hard sound to make. There are also the strange labiodental glide and alveopalatal fricative sounds. In certain environments, *d*, *g*, *v*, and *r* turn into

vowels.

There are three strange vowels that are not in English, represented by the letters *æ*, *ø* and *å*. They are all present in other Scandinavian languages - *æ* is present in Icelandic and Norwegian, *ø* is part of Norwegian, and *å* is part of Norwegian and Swedish, but English speakers will have problems with them. In addition, Danish has creaky-voiced vowels, which is very strange for an IE language. Danish language learners often report having a hard time pronouncing Danish vowels or even telling one apart from the other. Danish makes it onto lists of the wildest phonologies on Earth,and it made it high on a list of weirdest languages on Earth.

One advantage of all of the Scandinavian languages is that their basic vocabulary (the vocabulary needed to converse at a basic level and be understood) is fairly limited. In other words, without learning a huge number of words, it is possible to have a basic conversation in these languages. This is in contrast to Chinese, where you have to learn a lot of vocabulary just to converse at a basic level.

As with Maltese and Gaelic, there is little correlation between how a Danish word is written and how it is pronounced.

Pronunciation of Danish is difficult. Speech is very fast and comes out in a continuous stream that elides entire words. Vowels in the middle and at the end of words are seldom expressed. There are nine vowel characters, and each one can be pronounced in five or six different ways. There is nearly a full diphthong set, and somehow pharyngealization as accent is used as an accent. Danish has a huge set of vowels, one of the largest sets on Earth. The sheer number of vowels is one reason that Danish is so hard to pronounce. Danish has 32 vowels, 15 short, 13 long and four unstressed.

There is also a strange phonetic element called a *stød*, which is a very short pause slightly before the vowel(s) in a word. This element is very hard for foreigners to get right.

Just about any word has at least four meanings, and can serve as noun, verb, adjective or adverb. Danish has two genders (feminine and masculine have merged into common gender), and whether a noun is common or neuter is almost impossible to predict and simply must be memorized.

Suggesting that Danish may be harder to learn than Swedish or

Norwegian, it's said that Danish children speak later than Swedish or Norwegian children. One study comparing Danish children to Croatian tots found that the Croat children had learned over twice as many words by 15 months as the Danes. According to the study:

The University of Southern Denmark study shows that at 15 months, the average Danish toddler has mastered just 80 words, whereas a Croatian tot of the same age has a vocabulary of up to 200 terms.

According to the study, the primary reason Danish children lag behind in language comprehension is because single words are difficult to extract from Danish's slurring together of words in sentences. Danish is also one of the languages with the most vowel sounds, which leads to a 'mushier' pronunciation of words in everyday conversation.

Danish gets a **3 rating**, average difficulty.

**Swedish** has the disadvantage of having hundreds of irregular verbs. Swedish also has some difficult phonemes, especially vowels, since Swedish has nine vowels, not including diphthongs. Pronunciation of the *ö* and *å* (and sometimes *ä*, which has a different sound) can be difficult. Swedish also has pitch accent. Pronunciation is probably the hardest part of Swedish.

Words can take either an *-en* or an *-ett* ending, and there don't seem to be any rules about which one to use. The same word can have a number of different meanings.

Swedish, like German, has gender, but Swedish gender is quite predictable by looking at the word, unlike German, where deciding which of the three genders to use seems like a spin of the Roulette wheel.

Word order is comparatively free in that one can write a single sentence multiple ways while changing the meaning somewhat. So *I didn't know that* can be written the following ways:

*Det visste jag inte.*
*Det visste inte jag.*
*Jag visste inte det.*
*Jag visste det inte.*
*Inte visste jag det.*

For some reason, Swedish got a very high score on a study of the weirdest languages on Earth.

The different ways of writing that sentence depend on context. In particular, the meaning varies in terms of topic and focus.

There is a 3-way contrast in deixis:

*den*
*den här*
*den där*

Swedish also has the same problematic phrasal verbs that English does:

| | |
|---|---|
| *att slå* | *beat/hit* |
| *slå av* | *turn off* |
| *slå fast* | *settle/establish* |
| *slå igen* | *close/shut* |
| *slå igenom* | *become known/be a success* |
| *slå in* | *wrap in, come true* |
| *slå ner* | *beat down* |
| *slå på* | *turn on* |
| *slå runt* | *overturn* |
| *slå till* | *hit/strike/slap, strike a deal* |
| *slå upp* | *open (a book), look s.t. Up* |

Swedish orthography is difficult in learning how to write it, since the spelling seems illogical, like in English. The *sj* sound in particular can be spelled many different ways. However, Swedish spelling is probably easier than English since Swedish lacks a phonemic schwa, and schwa is the source of many of the problems in English. Where allophonic schwa does appear, it seems to be predictable.

One nice thing about Swedish grammar is that it is similar to English grammar in many ways.

Swedish can be compared to a tube in terms of ease of learning. The basics are harder to learn than in English, but instead of getting more difficult as one progresses as in English, the difficulty of Swedish stays more or less the same from basics to the most complicated. But learning to speak Swedish is easy enough compared to other languages.

Swedish gets a **2.5 rating**, easy to average difficulty.

## Celtic

Any **Gaelic** language is tough. Celtic languages are harder to learn than German or Russian.

## Insular Celtic

## Goidelic

**Old Irish** was the version of Irish written from 650 to 900 AD. It was used only by the educated and aristocratic elites. The rest of the population spoke a simplified version that was already on its way to becoming Middle Irish.

The verbal system in Old Irish is one of most complicated of all of the classical languages.

The persons are 1st, 2nd, 3rd and plural. The tenses are present, preterite, imperfect, perfect, future and an odd tense called secondary future. There are imperative and subjunctive moods. There is no infinitive - instead it is formed rather erratically as a verbal noun derived from the verb. This gerund undergoes 10 different declensions and often looks little like the verb it is derived from.

*cingid - to step -> céim - stepping*

There are both strong and weak verbs, and each has both simple and compound forms.

Bizarrely, every verb has not one but two different paradigms - the conjunct and the absolute. You use the conjunct when the verb is preceded by a conjunct particle such as *ní* (*not*) or *in* (the question particle). You use the absolute when there is no conjunct particle in front of the verb.

Hence, the present indicative of *glenaid* (*sticks fast*), is:

| Absolute | | Conjunct |
|---|---|---|
| *glenaim* | : | *glenaim* |
| *glenai* | : | *glenai* |
| *glenaid* | : | *glen* |
| *glenmai* | : | *glenam* |
| *glenthae* | : | *glenaid* |
| *glenait* | : | *glenat* |

The colon before the conjunct verbs indicates that a conjunct particle precedes the verb.

The phonological changes are some of the most complicated you could imagine. An attempt was made to orthographically portray all of these convoluted changes, but the orthography ended up a total mess.

Each consonant has four different values depending on where it is in the word and whether or not it is palatal. Hence, even though the 1st person absolute and conjunct look identical above (both are spelled *glenaim*), they are pronounced differently. The absolute is pronounced *glyenum*, and the conjunct is pronounced *glyenuv*.

The grammar is unbelievably complex, probably harder than Ancient Greek. There is even a reported non-IE substratum running underneath the language.

Old Irish gets a **5.5 rating**, nearly hardest of all.

**Irish** students take Irish for 13 years, and some take French for five years. These students typically know French better than Irish. There are inflections for the inflections of the inflections, a convoluted aspiration system, and no words for yes or no. The system of initial consonant mutation is quite baffling. Noun declension is mystifying. Irish has irregular nouns, but there are not many of them:

*the woman  an bhean*
*the women  na mná*

and there are only about 10 irregular verbs. There are dozens of different declension types for verbs. The various phonological gradations, lenitions and eclipses are not particularly regular. There are "slender" and "broad" variants of many of the consonants, and it is hard to tell the difference between them when you hear them. Many learners find the slender/broad consonants the hardest part of Irish. The orthography makes many lists of worst orthographies on Earth.

Irish gets a **4.5 rating**, very difficult.

Both **Scots Gaelic** and Irish Gaelic are written with non-phonetic spelling that is even more convoluted and irrational than English. This archaic spelling is in drastic need of revision, and it makes learners not want to learn the language. For instance, in Scots Gaelic, the word for *taxi* is *tacsaidh,* although the word is pronounced the same as the English word. There are simply too many unnecessary letters for too few sounds. Of the two, Scots Gaelic is harder due to many silent consonants.

Irish actually has rules for its convoluted spelling, and once you figure out the rules, it is fairly straightforward as it is quite regular and it is actually rational in its own way. In addition, Irish recently underwent a spelling reform. The Irish spelling system does make sense in an odd way, as it marks things such as palatalization and velarization.

Scottish Gaelic and Manx have gone a long time with no spelling reforms.

Scottish Gaelic gets a **4.5 rating**, very difficult.

**Manx** is probably the worst Gaelic language of all in terms of its spelling since it has Gaelic spelling yet uses an orthography based on English which results in a crazy mix that makes many lists of worst scripts.

Manx gets a **4.5 rating**, very difficult.

## Common Byrthonic

**Welsh** is also very hard to learn, although Welsh has no case compared to Irish's two cases. And Welsh has a mere five irregular verbs. Welsh is easier than Irish or Scottish Gaelic because it is written with a logical, phonetic alphabet. Welsh is also simpler grammar-wise, but things like initial consonant mutations can still seem confusing and are difficult for the non-Celtic speaker to master and understand. Verbal declension is irregular.

*caraf* *I love*

*carwn* *we love*

*cerais* *I loved*

*carasom* *we loved*

The problem above is that one cannot find any morpheme that means 1st person, 3rd person, or past tense in the examples. Even *car-* itself can change, and in connected speech often surfaces as *gar-*/*ger-*. And *carwn* can mean *I was loving* (imperfect) in addition to *we love*. There are no rules here, and you simply have to memorize the different forms.

The consonant mutations are what kills the Welsh learner. There are 300,000 Welsh speakers, but very few of them are fully fluent in the sense of getting all of the consonant mutations and other numerous grammar rules right. Even native speakers often do not get the consonant mutations correctly.

Probably the closest speakers to fully fluent would be the Welsh

language teachers. Residents of Wales who grew up speaking Welsh and in addition learned it in school are also close to but often not fully fluent. They can often figure out the mutations properly because they simply sound right to the ear. This type of speaker often spent little time learning the actual rules of Welsh grammar.

Welsh L2 speakers almost never become nearly fluent and are always easy to recognize as they cannot seem to get the flow of sentences and the consonant mutations right.

Welsh may be the hardest to learn of the extant Celtic languages.

Welsh gets a **5 rating**, extremely hard to learn.

**Breton** is about in the same ballpark as Welsh. It has a flexible grammar, a logical orthography and only four irregular verbs.

On the other hand, there are very few language learning materials, and most of those available are only written in French.

Breton gets a **4.5 rating**, very hard to learn.

## Hellenic

**Greek** is a difficult language to learn, and it's rated the second hardest language to learn by language professors. It's easy to learn to speak simply, but it's quite hard to get it down like a native. It's the rare second language learner who attains native competence. Like English, the spelling doesn't seem to make sense, and you have to memorize many words. Further, there is the unusual alphabet. However, the orthography is quite rational, about as good as that of Spanish. Whether or not Greek is an irregular language is controversial. It has that reputation, but some say it is not as irregular as it seems.

Greek has four cases: nominative, accusative, genitive and vocative (used when addressing someone). There are three genders: masculine, feminine and neuter. Nouns have several different declension patterns determined by the ending on the noun. Verb conjugations are about as complicated as in Romance. Greek does retain the odd aorist tense. In addition, it has the odd middle voice

and optative mood. Greek syntax is quite complicated.

Greek gets a **5 rating**, extremely difficult to learn.

**Classic or Ancient Greek** is worse, with a distinction between aspirated and unaspirated consonants, a pitch accent system and a truly convoluted, insanely irregular system of noun and verb inflection. It has a dual number in addition singular and plural and it has a very difficult optative case. Irregular verbs have one of six different stem types. The grammar is one of the most complex of all languages and the phonology and morphology are truly convoluted.

Ancient Greek is said to have had four different genitive cases, but it actually had four different uses of the genitive:

1. Objective Genitive - "*for obedience to faith*"
2. Subjective Genitive - "*faith's obedience*" or *faithful obedience*
3. Attributive Genitive - "*obedience of faith*"
4. Genitive of Apposition - *obedience*, i.e. *faith*

How confusing!

Classic Greek gets a **5.5 rating**, nearly hardest of all to learn.

## Armenian

An obscure branch of Indo-European, **Armenian,** is very hard to learn. Armenian is a difficult language in terms of grammar and phonetics, not to mention the very odd alphabet. The orthography is very regular, however there are some irregularities.

However, the alphabet itself presents many problems. Print and cursive can be very different, and upper case and lower case can also be quite different. In all, this means you have to memorize as many as four different shapes for each letter. However, the grammar is very regular.

There are voiced consonants and an alternation between aspirated and unaspirated unvoiced consonants. Nevertheless, there are many things about the grammar that seem odd compared to other IE languages. For instance, Armenian has agglutination, and that is a very strange feature for an IE language.

Part of the problem is that due to its location in the Caucasus, Armenian has absorbed influences from some of the wild nearby Caucasian languages. For instance, an extinct NE Caucasian Nakh language called Tsov is thought to have contributed to the Hurro-Urartian substratum in Armenian. So in a sense when you learn Armenian, you are also learning a bit of Chechen at the same time. For some reason, Armenian scored very high on a weirdest languages survey.

People who have learned both Arabic and Armenian felt that Armenian was much easier, so Armenian seems to be much easier than Arabic.

Armenian is **rated 4**, very hard to learn.

## Albanian

**Albanian** is another obscure branch of Indo-European. Albanian nouns have two genders (masculine and feminine), five cases including the ablative, lost in all other IE. Both definite and indefinite articles are widely used, a plus for English speakers. Most inflections were lost, and whatever is left doesn't even look very IE.

The verbal system is complex, having eight tenses including two aorists and two futures, and several moods, including indicative, imperative, subjunctive, conjunctive, optative and admirative. The last three are odd cases for IE. The optative only exists in IE in Ancient Greek, Sanskrit and Manx. Oddly enough, there is no infinitive. Active and passive voices are used.

Similarly to Gaelic, Albanian is even harder to learn than either German or Russian. Albanian may be even harder to learn than Polish.

Albanian is **rated 5**,extremely difficult.

## Slavic

All Slavic languages have certain difficulties. For instance, the problematic perfect/imperfect tenses discussed below in Czech and Slovak are present in all of Slavic. The animate/inanimate noun class distinction is present in all of Slavic also. Slavic languages also add verb prefixes to verbs, completely changing the meaning of the verb and creating a new verb (see Italian above).

## East Slavic

People are divided on the difficulty of **Russian**, but language teachers say it's one of the hardest to learn. Even after a couple of years of study, some learners find it hard to speak even a simple sentence correctly.

It has six basic cases - nominative, accusative, dative, genitive, instrumental and prepositional - and analyses have suggested up to 10 other cases. The most common of the extra cases are locative, partitive and several forms of vocative. All of these extra cases either do not apply to all nouns ("incomplete" cases) or seem to be identical to an existing case.

At any rate, the vocative is only used in archaic prose. And there is also a locative case, which is what the exceptions to the prepositional case are referred to. Russian has two genitive cases, the so-called Genitive 1 and Genitive 2. The first one is standard genitive and the second is the genitive-partitive (see above), which is now only used in archaic prose.

The grammar is fairly easy for a Slavic language. The problem comes with the variability in pronunciation. The adjectives and endings can be difficult. In addition, Russian has gender and lots of declinations. Like Lithuanian, almost everything in the language seems to decline. The adjectives change form if the nouns they describe have different endings. Adjectives also take case somehow.

Verbs have different forms depending on the pronouns that precede them. Russian has the same issues with perfective and imperfective

forms as Polish does (see the Polish section below). There are dozens of different declension types for verbs and many verbs that are irregular and don't fit into any of the declension types. In addition, there are many irregular nouns, syncretisms, and an aspectual system that is morphologically unpredictable.

Word order is pretty free. For instance, you can say:

*I love you* by saying

*I love you.*
*You love I.*
*Love you I.*
*I you love.*
*Love I you.*
*You I love*.

Pronunciation is strange, with one vowel that is between an *ü* and *i.* Many consonants are odd, and every consonant has a palatalized counterpart, which will be difficult to speakers whose languages lack phonemic palatalized consonants. These are the soft and hard consonants that people talk about in Russian. The *bl* sound is probably the hardest to make, but the trilled *r* is also problematic.

Russian has several words that, bizarrely, are made up of only a single consonant:

*s* - *with*, *off of*
*k* - *to*, *towards*
*v* - *in*, *into*
*b* - subjunctive/conditional mood particle (*would*)
*Z* - emphatic particle

In addition, Russian has some very strange words that begin with a doubled consonant sound:

**вв***одить*

**вв***ести*
**сс***ылка*

The orthography system is irregular, so there are quite a few silent letters and words that are pronounced differently than they are spelled.

Word Silent Letters Example

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *здн* | [*зн*] | *праздник* |
| *рдц* | [*рц*] | *сердце* |
| *лнц* | [*нц*] | *солнце* |
| *стн* | [*сн*] | *лестница* |
| *вств* | [*ств*] | *чувство* |
| *жч* | [*щ*] | *мужчина* |
| *зч* | [*щ*] | *извозчик* |
| *сч* | [*щ*] | *счастье* |
| *чт* | [*шт*] | *что* |
| *чн* | [*шн*] | *конечно* |
| *тц* | [*ц*] | *вкратце* |
| *дц* | [*ц*] | *двадцать* |
| *тч* | [*ч*] | *лётчик* |
| *дч* | [*ч*] | *докладчик* |
| *тся* | [*цца*] | *учится* |
| *ться* | [*цца*] | *учиться* |

Stress is quite difficult in Russian since it seems arbitrary and does not appear to follow obvious rules:

| | |
|---|---|
| *до́ма* | *at home* |
| *дома́* | *buildings* |

One problem is that phonemic stress, not written out, changes the way the vowel is pronounced. For instance:

*узнаю  I'm finding out*
*узнаю  I will find out*

The two are written identically, so how you tell them apart in written Russian, I have no idea. However in speech you can tell one from the other because the two forms have different stress.

Russian also has vowel reduction that is not represented in the orthography. The combination of stress and vowel reduction means that even looking at a Russian word, you are not quite sure how to pronounce it.

Like German, Russian builds morphemes into larger words. Again like German, this is worse than it sounds since the rules are not so obvious. In addition, there is the strange Cyrillic alphabet, which is nevertheless easier than the Arabic or Chinese ones. Russian also uses prepositions to combine with verbs to form the nightmare of phrasal verbs, but whereas English puts the preposition after the verb, Russian puts it in front of the verb.

All of Slavic has a distinction between animate and inanimate nouns as a sort of a noun class. Russian takes it further and even has a distinction between animate and inanimate pronouns in the male gender:

*dvoje muzhchin  two men*
*troje muzhchin  three men*
*chetvero muzhchin  four men*
*pyatero muzhchin  five men*
*shestero muzhchin  six men*
*semero muzhchin  seven men*

Compare to:

| | |
|---|---|
| *dva duba* | *two oaks* |
| *tri duba* | *three oaks* |
| *chetyre duba* | *four oaks* |

However, Russian only has the animate/inanimate distinction in pronouns and not in nouns in general.

Like Polish below, you use different verbs depending if you are going somewhere on foot or other than on foot. Second there is a distinction between going somewhere with a goal in mind and going somewhere with no particular goal in mind. For instance, *to go*:

*idti* (by foot, specific endpoint)
*xodit'* (by foot, no specific endpoint)
*exat'* (by conveyance, specific endpoint)
*ezdit'* (by conveyance, no specific endpoint)

The verb to carry also has four different forms with the same distinctions as above.

In addition, there are various prefixes you can put on a verb:

| | |
|---|---|
| *into* | *v-* |
| *out of* | *vy-* |
| *towards* | *po-* |
| *away from* | *u-* |
| *up to the edge of* | *pod-* |
| *away from the edge of* | *ot-* |
| *through* | *pro-* |
| *around* | *ob-* |

These prefixes look something like "verbal case." You an add any of those prefixes to any of the going or carrying verbs above. Therefore,

you can have:

*poiti* *walk up to something*
*obezdit'* *drive around with no goal*
*uxodit'* *walk away from something with no goal in mind*

The combination of paths and goals results in some very specific motion verbs.

Russian is harder to learn than English. We know this because Russian children take longer to learn their language than English speaking children do. The reason given was that Russian words tended to be longer, but there may be other reasons.

Russian has the advantage of having quite a bit of Romance and Greek loans for a Slavic language, but unfortunately, you will not typically hear these words in casual conversion. Russian also has no articles. English speakers will find this odd, but others regard it as a plus.

Russian is less difficult than Czech, Polish or Serbo-Croatian, although this is somewhat controversial.

Russian gets a **4 rating**, very hard to learn.

## West Slavic

## Czech and Slovak

**Czech** and Slovak are notoriously hard to learn; in fact, all Slavic languages are. Language professors rate the Slavic languages the third hardest to learn on Earth. Czech is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the hardest language to learn. Even the vast majority of Czechs never learn to speak their language correctly. They spend nine years in school studying Czech grammar, but some rules are learned only at university. Immigrants never seem to learn Czech well, however, there are a few foreigners who have learned Czech very well - say, three or fewer errors in a 30 minute monologue, so it is possible to learn Czech well even if it is not very common.

Writing Czech properly is even more difficult than speaking it correctly, so few Czechs write without errors. In fact, an astounding 1/3 of the population makes at least on grammatical or spelling mistake in every sentence they write!

The younger generation is now even worse as far as this goes, as Czech language teaching for natives has become more lax in recent years and drills have become fewer. Nevertheless, the Czech and Slovak orthographies are very rational. There is nearly a 1-1 sound/symbol correspondence.

Even natives often mess up the conditional (would). The 3rd conditional (past conditional) has nearly gone out of modern Czech and has merged with the present conditional:

3rd conditional - *If I "would have known" it, I would not have asked*

has merged with

2nd conditional - *If I "would know" it, I would not ask.*

This means conditional events in the present are no longer distinguished between those in the past, and the language is impoverished.

Native speakers also mix up a specific use of the gerund:

English:

*She looked at me smiling.*
*He walked along whistling.*
*He was in his bed reading a book.*

This is easy to say in English, and the use of these forms is rather common. However, it is very hard to make those sentences in Czech, and possibly only 3% of the population can formulate those sentences properly. Instead, they break them up into two sentences:

Czech:

*She looked at me, and she smiled.*
*He was in his bed, and he was reading.*

Czech is full of exceptions and exceptions to the exceptions. It is said that there are more exceptions than there are rules. Czech has seven cases in singular and seven more cases in plural for nouns, for a total of 59 different "modes" of declension. There are also words that swing back and forth between "modes." Adjectives and pronouns also have seven cases in the singular and plural. Czech is one of the few languages that actually has two genitive cases - one more or less possessive and the other more or less partitive. There are six genders, three in the singular and three in the plural.

When you put all that together, each noun can decline in 59 different ways. Further, these 59 different types of nouns each have 14 different forms depending on case. Verbs also decline. The verbs have both perfective and imperfective and have 45 different conjugation patterns. Czech learners often confuse the perfect and imperfect verbs. Verbs of motion can also be quite tricky.

One of the problems with Czech is that not only nouns but also verbs take gender, but they only do so in the past tense. In addition, Czech has a complicated aspect system that is often quite irregular and simply must be memorized to be learned.

This conjugation is fairly regular:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *viděl* | continuous past | *he saw* |
| *uviděl* | punctual | *once he suddenly saw* |
| *vídával* | repetitive | *he used to see (s.t.) repeatedly* |

Others are less regular:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *jedl* | continuous | *he ate* |
| *snědl dojedl* | | *he ate it all up* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *ujedl* | | *he ate a bit of it* |
| *pojedl* | | *he finished eating* |
| *jídával* | repetitive | *he used to eat repeatedly* |

Czech also has an evidential system. The particle *prý* is used to refer to hearsay evidence that you did not personally witness.

**Prý** *je tam zima.*
**Someone said/People say** *it's cold outside.*

Truth is that almost every word in the language is subject to declension. The suffixes on nouns and verbs change all the time in strange ways.

There are some difficult consonants such as *š*, *č*, *ť*, *ž*, *ľ*, *ď*, *dz*, *dž*, *Í* and *ŕ*. It's full of words that don't seem to have vowels.

Entire Czech sentences can have extreme consonant clusters that appear to lack vowels:

*Strč prst skrz krk.*
*Stick a finger through your neck.*

*Smrž pln skvrn zvlhl z mlh.*
*A morel full of spots welted from fogs...*

*Mlž pln skvrn zvh.*

However, the letters *r* and *l* are considered "half-vowels" in Czech, so the sentences above are easier to pronounce than you might think.

The letters *ř* and *r* (Czech has contrasting alveolar trills) are hard to pronounce, and *ř* is often said to exist in no longer language, including other Slavic languages, but this is not quite correct. It is only found in one other language on Earth - the Papuan language Kobon, which pronounces it a bit differently. Even Czechs have a hard time making these sounds properly (especially the *ř*), and many L2 speakers never get them right. There is also a hard and soft *i* which is hard to figure out.

As with other Slavic languages like Russian, it has the added problem

of fairly loose word order. In addition, there are significant differences between casual and formal speech where you use different forms for someone you are familiar with (are on a first name basis with) as opposed to someone you do not know well.

On the plus side, Czech stress, like that of Polish, is regular as the accent is always on the first syllable. But if you come from a language such as Spanish where the accent is typically on the second syllable, this might present an obstacle.

Czech gets a **5 rating**, extremely hard.

**Slovak** is closely related to Czech, and it is controversial which one is harder to learn. Slovak is definitely more archaic than Czech. Some say that Slovak is easier because it has a more regular grammar. Slovak has the additional problem is marking acute accents: *á*, *é*, *í*, *Í*, *ó*, *ŕ*, *ú* and *ý*. Slovak fortunately lacks the impossible Czech *ř* sound. Instead it has something called a "long r," (*ŕ*) which is not very easy to make either. This is something like the *er* sound in English *her*.

Slovak, like Czech, has retained the vocative, but it almost extinct as it is restricted to only a few nouns. Like Polish and Sorbian, Slovak also has an animate/inanimate distinction in gender for plural nouns. So Slovak has five genders: masculine, feminine and neuter in the singular and animate and inanimate in the plural.

Some say that Slovak is even harder than Polish, and there may be a good case that Czech and Slovak are harder than Polish.

Slovak gets a **5 rating**, extremely hard.

## Lechitic

**Polish** is similar to Czech and Slovak in having words that seem to have no vowels, but in Polish at least there are invisible vowels. That's not so obviously the case with Czech. Nevertheless, try these sentences:

1. *Wszczebrzeszynie chrząszcz brzmi w trzcinie i Szczebrzeszyn z tego słynie.*

2. *Wyindywidualizowaliśmy się z rozentuzjazmowanego tłumu.*
3. *W Szczebrzeszynie chrząszcz brzmi w trzcinie.*

*I* and *y*, *s* and *z*, *je* and *ě* alternate at the ends of some words, but the rules governing when to do this, if they exist, don't seem sensible. The letter *ť* is very hard to pronounce. There are nasal vowels as in Portuguese. The *ą*, *ć*, *ę*, *ł*, *ń*, *ó*, *sz*, *cz*, *dz*, *dź*, *dż* sounds are hard for foreigners to make. There are sounds that it is even hard for native speakers to make as they require a lot tongue movements.

A word such as *szczescie* is hard to Polish L2 speakers to pronounce. Polish written to spoken pronunciation makes little sense, as in English - *h* and *ch* are one sound - *h*, *ó* and *u* are the same sound, and *u* may form diphthongs where it sounds like *ł*, so *u* and *ł* can be the same sound in some cases.

*Kura (hen)* and *kóra* are pronounced exactly the same way, and this is confusing to Polish children. However, the distinction between *h*/*ch* has gone of most spoken Polish. Furthermore, there is a language committee, but like the French one, it is more concerned with preserving the history or the etymology of the word and less with spelling the word phonemically. Language committees don't always do their jobs!

Polish orthography, while being regular, is very complex. Polish uses a Latin alphabet unlike most other Slavic languages which use a Cyrillic alphabet. The letters are: *AĄ B CĆ D EĘ FGHIJK LŁ M NŃ OÓ QPRSTUVW XY ZŹŻ*.

Further, native speakers speak so fast it's hard for non-natives to understand them. Due to the consonant-ridden nature of Polish, it is harder to pronounce than most Asian languages. Listening comprehension is made difficult by all of the *sh* and *ch* like sounds. Furthermore, since few foreigners learn Polish, Poles are not used to hearing their language mangled by second-language learners. Therefore, foreigners' Polish will seldom be understood.

Polish grammar is said to be more difficult than Russian grammar. Polish has the following:

There are five different tenses: *zaprzeszły*, *przeszły*, *teraźniejszy*, *przyszły prosty*, and *przyszły złozony*. There are seven different

genders: male, feminine, neuter, animate and inanimate in the singular and animate and inanimate in the plural. Male nouns have five patterns of declension, and feminine and neuter nouns have six different patterns of declension. Adjectives have two different declension patterns. Numbers have five different declension patterns: *główne*, *porządkowe*, *zbiorowe*, *nieokreślone*, and *ułamkowe*. There is a special pattern for nouns that are only plural.

There are seven different cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, locative, vocative, and the genitive case is irregular. Verbs have nine different persons in their declensions: *ja*, *ty*, *on*, *ona*, *ono*, *my*, *wy*, *oni*, *one*. There are different conjugation patterns for men and women. There are 18 different conjugation patterns in the verb (11 main ones). There are five different polite forms: for a man, a woman, men, women and men and women combined.

There are four different participle forms, three of which inflect. Some of these are active and others are passive, but the whole system is incredibly complex. All of the participles decline like nouns, each gender adds its bit to each pattern which in turn change more according to tense.

Polish has seven cases, including the vocative which has gone out of most Slavic. Although the vocative is becoming less common in Polish, it is still used in formal situations, and it's not really true that it is a dying form.

In an informal situation, a Pole might be more like to use nominative rather than vocative:

*Cześć Marek!* (Nom.), rather than
*Cześć Marku!* (Voc.)

However, in a more formal situation, the vocative is still likely to be used:

*Dzień dobry panie profesorze/doktorze!* (Voc.), rather than
*Dzień dobry pan profesor/doktor!* (Nom.)

Case declension is very irregular, unlike German. Polish consonant gradation is called *oboczność* (variation).

It also has seven genders, five in the singular and two in the plural. The genders of nouns cause the adjectives modifying them to inflect differently.

Noun

*matka* *mother* (female gender)
*ojciec* *father* (male gender)
*dziecko child* (neuter gender)

Modifying Adjective

*brzydkiugly* *ugly*

Singular

*brzydka matka* *ugly mother*
*brzydki ojciec* *ugly father*
*brzydkie dziecko* *ugly child*

Plural

*brzydkie matki* *ugly mothers*
*brzydcy ojcowie* *ugly fathers*
*brzydkie dzieci* *ugly children*

Gender even effects verbs.

*I ate* (female speaker) *Ja zjadłam*

*I ate* (male speaker) *Ja zjadłem*

There are two different forms of the verb *kill* depending on whether the 1st person singular and plural and 2nd person plural killers are males or females.

*I killed* *zabiłem/zabiłam*

*We killed* *zabiliśmy/zabiłyśmy*

*They killed* *zabili/zabiły*

The perfective and imperfective tenses create a dense jungle of forms:

*kupować - to buy*

| Singular | Simple Past | Imperfect |
|---|---|---|
| I (f.) | *kupiłam* | *kupowałam* |
| I (m.) | *kupiłem* | *kupowałem* |
| you (f.) | *kupiłaś* | *kupowałaś* |
| you (m.) | *kupiłeś* | *kupowałeś* |
| he | *kupił* | *kupował* |
| she | *kupiła* | *kupowała* |
| it | *kupiło* | *kupowało* |
| Plural | | |
| we (f.) | *kupiłyśmy* | *kupowałyśmy* |
| we (m.) | *kupiliśmy* | *kupowaliśmy* |
| you (f.) | *kupiłyście* | *kupowałyście* |
| you (m.) | *kupiliście* | *kupowaliście* |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| they (f.) | *kupiły* | *kupowały* |
| they (m.) | *kupili* | *kupowali* |

The verb above forms an incredible 28 different forms in the perfect and imperfect past tense alone.

The existence of the perfective and imperfective verbs themselves is the least of the problem. The problem is that each verb - perfective or imperfective - is in effect a separate verb altogether, instead of just being conjugated differently.

The verb *to see* has two completely different verbs in Polish:

*widziec*
*zobaczyc*

*Widziałem - I saw* (repeatedly in the past; *I saw the sun come up every morning*).

*Zobaczyłem - I saw* (only once; *I saw the sun come up yesterday*).

Some of these verbs are obviously related to each other:

*robić/zrobić*
*czytać/przeczytać*
*zachowywać/zachować*
*jeść/zjeść*

But others are very different:

*mówić/powiedzieć*
*widzieć/zobaczyć*
*kłaść/położyć*

This is not a tense difference - the very verbs themselves are

different! So for every verb in the language, you effectively have to learn two different verbs. The irregular forms may date from archaic Polish.

In addition, the future perfect and future imperfect often conjugate completely differently, though the past forms usually conjugate in the same way - note the *-em* endings above. There is no present perfect as in English, since in Polish the action must be completed, and you can't be doing something at this precise moment and at the same time have just finished doing it. 95% of verbs have these maddening dual forms, but for 5% of verbs that lack a perfective version, you only have one form.

It's often said that one of the advantages of Polish is that there are only three tenses, but this is not really case, as there are at least eight tenses:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Indicative | *grac* | *to play* |
| Present | *gram* | *I play* |
| Past | *gralem* | *I played* |
| Conditional | *gralbym* | *I would play* |
| Future | *będę grać* | *I will play* |
| Continuous future | *będę grał* | *I will be playing* |
| Perfective future | *bogram* | *I will have played** |
| Perf. conditional | *pogralbym* | *I would have played* |

*Implies you will finish the action

There is also an aspectual distinction made when referring to the past. Different forms are used based on whether or not the action has been completed.

Whereas in English we use one word for *go* no matter what mode of transportation we are using to get from one place to another, in Polish, you use different verbs if you are going by foot, by car, by plane, by boat or by other means of transportation.

In addition, there is an animate-inanimate distinction in gender. Look at the following nouns:

*hat* *kapelusz*

*computer* *komputer*

*dog* *pies*

*student* *uczen*

All are masculine gender, but *computer* and *hat* are inanimate, and *student* and *dog* are animate, so they inflect differently.

*I see a new hat* *Widze nowy kapelusz*
*I see a new student* *Widze nowego ucznia*

Notice how the *now-* form changed.

In addition to completely irregular verbs, there are also irregular nouns in Polish:

*człowiek → ludzie*

There are also irregularities in the way nouns form the diminutive.

*pies (dog) - psiaczek*

*słońce (sun) - słoneczko*

Poles tend to use the diminutive excessively and this drives Polish learners mad. In addition, some diminutives have multiple forms:

*Pies (dog)*: *piesek*, *psiaczek*, *piesunio*, *psiak*, *psisko*, *psinka*

*Lalka (doll)*: *laleczka*, *lalunia*, *lalusia*, *laleńka*, *lala*

Let us look at pronouns. English has one word for the genitive case of

the 1st person singular - *my*. In Polish, depending on the context, you can have the following 11 forms, and actually there are even more than 11:

*mój*
*moje*
*moja*
*moją*
*mojego*
*mojemu*
*mojej*
*moim*
*moi*
*moich*
*moimi*

Numerals can be complex. English has one word for the number 2 - *two*. Polish has 21 words for *two* (however, only 5-6 of them are in common use):

*dwa* (nominative non-masculine personal male and neuter and non-masculine personal accusative)
*dwaj* (masculine personal nominative)
*dwie* (nominative and accusative female)
*dwóch* (genitive, locative and masculine personal accusative)
*dwom* (dative)
*dwóm* (dative)
*dwu* (alternative version sometimes used for instrumental, genitive, locative and dative)
*dwoma* (masculine instrumental)
*dwiema* (female instrumental)
*dwoje* (collective, nominative + accusative)
*dwojga* (collective, genitive)
*dwojgu* (collective, dative + locative)
*dwójka* (noun, nominative)
*dwójkę* (noun, accusative)
*dwójki* (noun, genitive)
*dwójce* (noun, dative and locative)

*dwójką* (noun, instrumental)
*dwójko* (vocative)
*dwojgiem* (collective, instrumental)
*dwójkach*
*dwójek*
*dwója*
*dwójkami*

Polish also has the paucal form like Serbo-Croatian. It is the remains of the old dual. The paucal applies to impersonal masculine, feminine and neuter nouns but not to personal masculine nouns.

Personal Masculine

| | |
|---|---|
| *one boy* | *jeden chłopiec* |
| *two boys* | *dwóch chłopców* |
| *three boys* | *trzech chłopców* |
| *four boys* | *czterech chłopców* |
| *five boys* | *pięciu chłopców* |
| *six boys* | *sześciu chłopców* |
| *seven boys* | *siedmiu chłopców* |
| *eight boys* | *ośmiu chłopców* |

Impersonal Masculine

| | |
|---|---|
| *one dog* | *jeden pies* |
| *two dogs* | *dwa psy* |
| *three dogs* | *trzy psy* |
| *four dogs* | *cztery psy* |
| *five dogs* | *pięć psów* |
| *six dogs* | *sześć psów* |
| *seven dogs* | *siedem psów* |

*eight dogs  osiem psów*

In the above, two, three and four dogs is in the paucal (*psy*), while two, three or four men is not and is instead in the plural (*chłopców*)

A single noun can change in many ways and take many different forms.

Compare *przyjaciel – friend*

| | Singular | Plural |
|---|---|---|
| *who is my friend* | *przyjaciel* | *przyjaciele* |
| *who is not my friend* | *przyjaciela* | *przyjaciół* |
| *friend who I give s.t. to* | *przyjacielowi* | *przyjaciołom* |
| *friend who I see* | *przyjaciela* | *przyjaciół* |
| *friend who I go with* | *z przyajcielem* | *z przyjaciółmi* |
| *friend who I dream of* | *o przyjacielu* | *o przyjaciołach* |
| *Oh my friend!* | *Przyajcielu!* | *Przyjaciele!* |

There are 12 different forms of the noun *friend* above.

Plurals change based on number. In English, the plural of *telephone* is *telephones*, whether you have two or 1,000 of them. In Polish, you use different words depending on how many telephones you have:

two, three or four *telefony*, but
five *telefonów*.

Sometimes, this radically changes the word, as in *hands*:

four *ręce*, but
five *rąk*.

Polish seems like Lithuanian in the sense that almost every grammatical form seems to inflect in some way or other. Even conjunctions inflect in Polish.

In addition, like Serbo-Croatian, Polish can use multiple negation in a sentence. You can use up to five negatives in a perfectly grammatical sentence:

*Nikt nikomu nigdy nic nie powiedział.*
*Nobody ever said anything to anyone*.

Like Russian, there are multiple different ways to say the same thing in Polish. However, the meaning changes subtly with these different word combinations, so you are not exactly saying the same thing with each change or word order. Nevertheless, this mess does not seem to be something that would be transparent to the Polish learner.

In English, you can say *Ann has a cat*, but you can't mix the words up and mean the same thing. In Polish you can say *Ann has a cat* five different ways:

*Ania ma kota.*
*Kota ma Ania.*
*Ma Ania kota.*
*Kota Ania ma.*
*Ma kota Ania.*

The first one is the most common, but the other four can certainly be used. The truth that while the general meaning is the same in each sentence, the deep meaning changes with each sentence having a slightly different nuanced interpretation.

In addition, Polish has a wide variety of dialects, and a huge vocabulary. Similar to Hungarian, there may be many different words for the same thing.

Although Polish grammar is said to be irregular, this is probably not true. It only gives the appearance of being irregular as there are so many different rules, but there is a method to the madness underneath it all. The rules themselves are so complex and numerous

that it is hard to figure them all out.

Polish appears to be more difficult than Russian. For example, in Russian as in English, the 1st through 3rd person past tense forms are equivalent, whereas in Polish, they are each different:

| | English | Russian | Polish |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1st past | *I went* | *ya pashou* | *ja poszedłem* |
| 2nd past | *you went* | *ty pashou* | *ty poszedłeś* |
| 3rd past | *he went* | *on pashou* | *on poszedł* |

It is said English-speaking children reach full adult competency in the language (reading, writing, speaking, spelling) at age 12. Polish children do not reach this milestone until age 16. Even adult Poles make a lot of mistakes in speaking and writing Polish properly. However, most Poles are quite proud of their difficult language (though a few hate it), and even take pride in its difficult nature.

On the positive side, in Polish, the stress is fixed, there are no short or long vowels nor is there any vowel harmony, there are no tones and it uses a Latin alphabet.

Polish is one of the most difficult of the Slavic languages. It is harder than Russian (though this is controversial) and about as hard as Czech and Slovak.

Polish gets a **5 rating**, extremely hard.

## South Slavic

## Eastern

It's controversial whether **Bulgarian** is an easy or hard language to learn. The truth is that it may be the easiest Slavic language to learn, but all Slavic languages are hard. Though it is close to Russian, there are Russians who have been living there for 20 years and still can't

understand it well.

It has few cases compared to the rest of Slavic. There are three cases, but they are present only in pronouns. The only case in nouns is vocative. This is odd because most Slavic languages have either lost or are in the process of losing the vocative, and in Bulgarian it is the only case that has been retained.

Compared to English, Bulgarian is well structured and straightforward with little irregularity. In addition, Bulgarian has more Romance (mostly French) and Greek borrowings than any other Slavic languages. Romance came in via the Vlahs who lived there before the Slavs moved in and Greek from the Byzantine period. In recent years, many English borrowings have also gone in.

Bulgarian has a suffixed general article that is not found in the rest of Slavic but is apparently an areal feature borrowed from Albanian. The stress rules are nightmarish, and it seems as if there are no rules.

Bulgarian has grammatical gender, with three genders - masculine, feminine and neuter. In addition, adjectives must agree with the gender of the noun they are modifying. In English, adjectives are invariable no matter what the noun is:

*pretty man*
*pretty woman*
*pretty horse*
*pretty table*

However, the Bulgarian alphabet is comparatively simple compared to other Slavic alphabets. Since 1945, it has only had 30 letters. Compare this to the 70 letters in Polish. There are only six vowels, and it has the easiest consonant clusters in Slavic. The orthography is very regular, with no odd spellings. The Cyrillic alphabet is different for those coming from a Latin alphabet and can present problems. For one thing, letters that look like English letters are pronounced in different ways:

*B* is pronounced *v* in Bulgarian
*E* is pronounced *eh* in Bulgarian

*P* is pronounced *r* in Bulgarian

There are a number of Bulgarian letters that look like nothing you have ever seen before: *Ж*, *Я*, Ь, *Ю*, *Й*, *Щ*, *Ш*, and *Ч*. Bulgarian handwriting varies to a great degree and the various styles are often difficult to map back onto the typewritten letters that they represent.

While Bulgarian has the advantage of lacking much case, Bulgarian verbs are quite complex even compared to other Slavic languages. Each Bulgarian verb can have up to 3,000 forms as it changes across person, number, voice, aspect, mood, tense and gender. Bulgarian has two aspects (perfect and imperfect), voice, nine tenses, five moods and six non-infinitival verbal forms.

For instance, each verb has at two aspects - simple and continuous - for each of the tenses, which are formed in different ways. Onto this they add a variety of derivatives such as prefixes, suffixes, etc. that change the meaning in subtle ways:

Aorist or Perfect:

*да прочета* *to read in whole a single text/book/etc* (viewed as fact, that is the duration of the action does not interest us)
*да изчета* *to read every book there is on the subject* (viewed as fact, that is the duration of the action does not interest us)
*да дочета* *to finish reading something* (viewed as fact, that is the duration of the action does not interest us)
*да изпоизчета* *to read every book/article/etc there is on the subject (humorous)* - (viewed as fact, that is the duration of the action does not interest us)

Continuous or Imperfect:

*да чета* *to be reading* (viewed as an action in progress)
*да прочитам* *to read in whole a single text/book/etc* (viewed as an action in progress)
*да изчитам* *to read every book there is on the subject* (viewed as an action in progress)

Mood is very complicated. There are different ways to say the same idea depending on how you know of the event. If you know about it historically, you mark the sentence with a particular mood. If you doubt the event, you mark with another mood.

If you know it historically but doubt it, you use yet another mood. And there are more than that. These forms were apparently borrowed from Turkish. These forms are rare in world languages. One is Yamana, a Patagonian language that has only one speaker left.

In Bulgarian, you always know if something is a noun, a verb or an adjective due to its marking. You will never have the same word as an adjective, noun and verb. In English, you can have words that act as verbs, adjectives and nouns.

*Let's dance!*
*Let's go to the dance.*
*Let's go to dance lessons.*

Bulgarian is probably the easiest Slavic language to learn.

Bulgarian gets **a 3.5 rating**, above average difficulty.

**Macedonian** is very close to Bulgarian, and some say it is a dialect of Bulgarian. However, I believe that is a separate language closely related to Bulgarian. Macedonian is said the be the easiest Slavic language to learn, easier than Bulgarian. This is because it is easier to pronounce than Bulgarian. Like Bulgarian, Macedonian has lost most all of its case. But there are very few language learning materials for Macedonian.

Macedonian gets a **3.5 rating**, above average difficulty.

## Western

**Serbo-Croatian**, similar to Czech, has seven cases in the singular and seven in the plural, plus there are several different declensions.

The vocative is still going strong in Serbo-Croatian (S-C), as in Polish, Ukrainian and Bulgarian. There 15 different types of declensions: seven tenses, three genders, three moods, and two aspects. Whereas English has one word for the number 2 - *two*, Serbo-Croatian has 17 words.

Case abbreviations below:
N = NAV - nominative, accusative, vocative
G = Genitive
D = Dative
L = Locative
I = Instrumental

Masculine inanimate gender

N *dva*
G *dvaju*
D L I *dvama*

Feminine gender

N *dve*
G *dveju*
D L I *dvema*

Mixed gender

N *dvoje*
G *dvoga*
D L I *dvoma*

Masculine animate gender

N *dvojica*
G *dvojice*

D L *dvojici*
I *dvojicom*

"Twosome"
N *dvojka*
G *dvojke*
D L *dvojci*
I *dvojkom*

The grammar is incredibly complex. There are imperfective and perfective verbs, but when you try to figure out how to build one from the other, it seems irregular. This is the hardest part of Serbo-Croatian grammar, and foreigners not familiar with other Slavic tongues usually never get it right.

Serbian has a strange form called the "paucal." It is the remains of the old dual, and it also exists in Polish and Russian. The paucal is a verbal number like singular, plural and dual. It is used with the numbers *dva* (2), *tri* (3), *četiri* (4) and *oba*/*obadva* (both) and also with any number that contains 2, 3 or 4 (22, 102, 1032).

*gledalac* *viewer*
*pažljiv(i)* *careful*
*gledalac pažljiv(i)* *careful viewer*

*1 careful viewer* *jedan pažljivi gledalac*
*2 careful viewers* *dva pažljiva gledaoca*
*3 careful viewers* *tri pažljiva gledaoca*
*5 careful viewers pet pažljivih gledalaca*

Above, *pažljivi gledalac* is singular, *pažljivih gledalaca* is plural and *pažljiva gledaoca* is paucal.

As in English, there are many different ways to say the same thing. Pronouns are so rarely used that some learners are surprised that they exist, since pronominalization is marked on the verb as person and number. Word order is almost free or at least seems arbitrary,

similar to Russian.

Serbo-Croatian, like Lithuanian, has pitch accent - low-rising, low-falling, short-rising and short-falling. It's not the same as tone, but it's similar. In addition to the pitch accent differentiating words, you also have an accented syllable somewhere in the word, which as in English, is unmarked. And when the word conjugates or declines, the pitch accent can jump around in the word to another syllable and even changes its type in ways that do not seem transparent. It's almost impossible for foreigners to get this pitch-accent right.

The "hard" *ch* sound is written *č*, while the "soft" *ch* sound is written *ć*. It has syllabic *r* and *l*. Long consonant clusters are permitted. See this sentence:

*Na vrh brda vrba mrda.*

However, in many of these consonant clusters, a schwa is present between consonants in speech, though it is not written out.

S-C, like Russian, has words that consist of only a single consonant:

*s – with*

Serbo-Croatian does benefit from a phonetic orthography.

It is said that few if any foreigners ever master Serbo-Croatian well. Similar to Czech and Polish, it is said that many native speakers make mistakes in S-C even after decades of speaking it, especially in pitch accent.

Serbo-Croatian is often considered to be one of the hardest languages on Earth to learn. It is as hard as Russian but not as hard as Polish.

Serbo-Croatian gets a **5 rating**, very difficult.

**Slovenian or Slovene** is also a very hard language to learn, probably on a par with Serbo-Croatian. It has three number distinctions, singular, dual and plural. It's the only major IE European language that has retained the dual. Sorbian has also retained the dual, but it is a minor tongue. However, the dual may be going out in

Slovenia. In Primorska it is not used at all, and in the rest of Slovenia, the feminine dual is not used in casual speech (plural is used instead), but the masculine dual is still used for masculine nouns and mixed pairs of masculine and feminine nouns.

In addition, there are six cases, as Slovene has lost the vocative. There are 18 different declensions of the word *son*, but five of them are identical, so there are really only 13 different forms.

| | Singular | Dual | Plural |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | *Sin* | *Sina* | *Sini* |
| 2. | *Sina* | *Sinov* | *Sinov* |
| 3. | *Sinu* | *Sinovoma* | *Sinovom* |
| 4. | *Sina* | *Sinova* | *Sinove* |
| *5.* | *O sinu* | *O sinovoma* | *O sinovih* |
| *6.* | *S sinom* | *Z sinovoma* | *Z sini* |

There are seven different ways that nouns decline depending on gender, but there are exceptions to all of the gender rules. The use of particles such as *pa* is largely idiomatic. In addition, there is a lack of language learning materials for Slovene.

Some sounds are problematic. Learners have a hard time with the *č* and *ž* sounds. There are also "open" and "closed" vowels as in Portuguese.

Here is an example of a word that can be difficult to pronounce:

*križišče – crossroads*

However, Slovene has the past perfect that is the same as the English tense, lost in the rest of Slavic. In addition, via contact with German and Italian, many Germanic and Romance loans have gone in. If you know some German and have some knowledge of another Slavic language, Slovene is not overwhelmingly difficult.

Some people worry that Slovene might go extinct in the near future, as it is spoken by only 2 million people. However, even this small

language has 356,881 headwords in an online dictionary. So it is clear that Slovene has plenty enough vocabulary to deal with the modern world.

Slovene is easier than Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Polish, Czech or Slovak.

Slovenian gets a **4 rating**, very hard.

## Baltic

## Eastern Baltic

**Lithuanian**, an archaic Indo-European Baltic tongue, is extremely difficult to learn. There are many dialects, which is interesting for such a small country, and the grammar is very difficult, with many rules. There is grammatical gender for nouns, and in addition, even numerals have gender in all cases. The language is heavily inflectional such that you can almost speak without using prepositions.

A single verb has 16 participial forms, and that is just using masculine gender for the participles. You can also add feminine forms to that verb. There are two main genders or *giminės*, masculine and feminine, but there is also neutral gender (*bevardė giminė*), which has three different forms. Verbs further decline via number (singular, dual and plural) and six different cases. There are five classes of verbs and six modes of declension for nouns (*linksniai*). However, Lithuanian verb tense is quite regular. You only need to remember infinitive, 3rd person present and 3rd person past, and after that, all of the conjugations are regular.

Here is an example of the Lithuanian verb:

*Eiti* - *to go*. *Ei* is the verb root, and *ti* is in infinitival suffix.

Verbs decline according to:

Person and number

1st singular *einu* *I go*
3rd dual *einava we two go*
1st plural *einame we go*

The four tenses

2nd pl. past *Ėjote* *you (guys) went*
2 sing. imperfect *eidavote you used to go*
2 sing. indicative *einate* *you go*
2 sing. future *eisite* *you will go*

They also change according to something called "participants." The participant paradigm has three tenses and all three genders. Participants are further divided into direct and indirect.

Regular direct participant (3 tenses, 3 genders)

Male

*Ėjęs while he himself went*
*einąs while he himself is going*
*eisiąs while he himself will be going*

Female

*Ėjusi while she herself went*

Neuter

*buvo einama while it itself went*
*einama while it itself was going*
*bus einama while it itself will be going*

Regular indirect participant (3 tenses, 3 genders)

Male

past *eidytas one that was forced to go*
present *eidomas one that is being forced to go*
future *bus eidomas one that will be forced to go*

Semi-participant (no tenses, 2 genders)

Male

*eidamas while going himself*

Female

*eidama while going herself*

Active participant (2 tenses, no genders)

past *Ėjus while going (in the past)*
present *einant while going now*

2nd infinitive or *budinys* (no tenses)

*eite in a way of going*

Plusquamperfect (be + regular participants)

Paradigm

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| indicative | *būti* | *to have been gone* |
| present | *yra* | *has been gone* |
| past | *buvo* | *had been gone* |
| imperfect | *būdavo* | *used to have been gone* |
| future | *bus* | *will have been gone* |

past 3pl *buvo ėję they had been gone*

Additional moods

Imperative (all persons)

| | |
|---|---|
| *Eik!* | *Go!* |
| *Eikime!* | *Let's go!* |
| *Teeina/Lai eina!* | *Let him/her go!* |

Subjunctive (all persons)

*eičiau I would go*
*eitum thou wouldst go*

In addition, while most verb marking is done via suffixes, Lithuanian can make aspect via both suffixes and prefixes, bizarrely enough (Arkadiev 2011).

Determining whether a noun is masculine or feminine is easier than in German where you often have to memorize which noun takes which gender. Lithuanian is similar to Spanish in that the ending will often give you a hint about which gender the noun takes.

Here is an example of the sort of convolutions you have to go through to attach the adjective *good* to a noun.

*geras - good*

| | Masculine | | Feminine | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Singular | Plural | Singular | Plural |
| Nominative | *geras* | *geri* | *gera* | *geros* |
| Genitive | *gero* | *gerų* | *geros* | *gerų* |
| Dative | *geram* | *geriems* | *gerai* | *geroms* |
| Accusative | *gerą* | *gerus* | *gerą* | *geras* |
| Instrumental | *geru* | *gerais* | *gera* | *geromis* |
| Locative | *gerame* | *geruose* | *geroje* | *gerose* |

The noun system in general of Lithuanian is probably more complicated even than the complex Russian noun system. Lithuanian is possibly more irregular and may have more declensions than even Polish. Learners often feel that the grammar is illogical.

Furthermore, while it does not have lexical tone per se, it does have pitch accent - there are three different pitches or degrees (*laipsniai*), which sound like tones but are not tones. Stress is hardly predictable and nearly needs to be learned word by word. It's almost impossible for foreigners to get the accent right, and the accents tend to move around a lot across words during declension/conjugation such that the rules are opaque if they exist at all. It was formerly thought to be nearly random, but it has now been found that Lithuanian stress actually falls into four paradigms, so there is a system there after all.

You cannot really forget about lexical tone when learning Lithuanian, as stress is as fundamental to Lithuanian as tone is to Mandarin.

Often you need a dictionary to figure out where the accent should be on a word. Lithuanian pronunciation is also difficult. For example, look at *r**i**mti (to get calm)* and *rimt**i** (serious* - plural, masculine, nominative). There is a short *i* sound that is the same in both words, but the only difference is where the stress or pitch accent goes. Consonants undergo some complicated changes due to palatalization. Lithuanian has soft and hard (palatalized and nonpalatalized) consonants as in Russian.

Try these words and phrases:

*šalna*
*šąla šiandien*
*ačiū už skanią vakarienę*
*pasikiškiakopūsteliaudamasis*
*ūkis*
*malūnas*
*čežėti šiauduose*

Or this paragraph:

*Labas, kaip šiandien sekasi? Aš esu iš Lietuvos, kur gyvenu visą savo gyvenimą. Lietuvių kalba yra sunkiausia iš visų pasaulyje. Ačiū už dėmesį*.

Lithuanian is an archaic IE language that has preserved a lot of forms that the others have lost.

In spite of all of that, picking up the basics of Lithuanian may be easier than it seems, and while foreigners usually never get the pitch-accent down, the actual rules are fairly sensible. Nevertheless, many learners never figure out these rules and to them, there seem to be no rules for pitch accent.

Learning Lithuanian is similar to learning Latin. If you've been able to learn Latin, Lithuanian should not be too hard. Also, Lithuanian is very phonetic; words are pronounced how they are spelled.

Some languages that are similar to English, like Norwegian and Dutch, can be learned to a certain extent simply by learning words and ignoring grammar. I know Spanish and have been able to learn a fair amount of Portuguese, French and Italian without learning a bit of grammar in any of them.

Lithuanian won't work that way because due to case, base words change form all the time, so it will seem like you are always running into new words, when it fact it's the same base word declining in various case forms. There's no shortcut with Latin and Lithuanian. You need to learn the case grammar first, or little of it will make sense.

Some say that Lithuanian is even harder to learn than the hardest Slavic languages like Polish and Czech. It may be true.

Lithuanian gets a **5 rating**, extremely hard to learn.

**Latvian** is another Baltic language that is somewhat similar to Lithuanian. It's also hard to learn. Try this:

*Sveiki, esmu no Latvijas, un mūsu valoda ir skanīga, skaista un ar ļoti sarežģītu gramatisko sistēmu*.

Latvian and Lithuanian are definitely harder to learn than Russian. They both have aspects like in Russian but have more cases than Russian, plus a lot more irregular verbs. Latvian, like Lithuanian, has a tremendous amount of inflection. The long vowels can be hard to pronounce.

Latvian is easier to learn than Lithuanian. The grammar is easier to figure out and the phonological system is much easier. Also, Latvian has lost many archaic IE features that Lithuanian has retained. Latvian has regular stress, always on the first syllable, as opposed to Lithuanian's truly insane stress system. Latvian has fewer noun declensions, and fewer difficult consonant clusters.

Latvian gets a **4 rating**, very hard.

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