

Mirror, mirror on the wall – which is the most beautiful language of them all? There is no easy way to answer that question and everyone has their favourites. However, at a language beauty contest in 1934 in Paris, Ukrainian took third place right after French and Persian. I am not aware of any more recent language beauty contests!

Irish has no words for “yes” or “no”. To answer the question you use verb forms. So the answer to “Did they sell the house?” would be “(they) sold” or “(they) didn’t sell”. Or in Irish: “Ar dhíol siad an teach? Dhíol. Níor dhíol.” Even though Irish has no words for “yes” and “no” it has many unique words, just as the language on the next page...

There is an expression in Spanish “¡el mundo es un pañuelo!” (the world is a handkerchief) to indicate our surprise when we meet someone by chance in an unexpected place, thereby showing that the world is much smaller than we really thought. And isn’t this what language learning and learning about other cultures is all about anyway? Spanish is truly a world language with 20 countries having Spanish as an official language – ¡Olé!

Luxembourgish received its written form rather recently! Traditionally, Luxembourgish was rarely written, so there were no official rules of spelling and grammar until they were established by the government around 40 years ago, in 1984. And what about sign languages, can you write those down? Flip over to the next page to find out.

Until recently Romani has exclusively been passed down to the next generation orally so there is no generally accepted written standard. Individual Romani varieties are written with alphabets that are often based on the surrounding dominant language where a Roma group lives. Yet today it is possible to read political texts, newspapers and even Shakespeare in Romani!

Frisian is probably the most similar living language to English. “De sinne is waarm en it ljocht fan de sinneskyn fielt noflik mei de sêfte wyn.” Did you figure it out? See the English version: “The sun is warm and the light from the sun-shining feels good with the soft wind.”

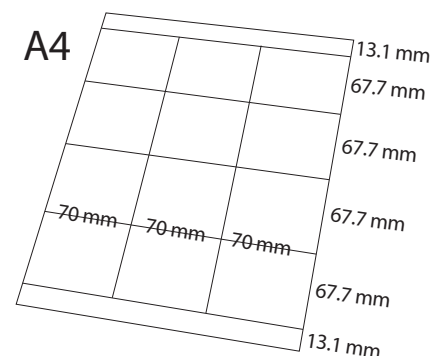
Dutch has a very special word: “gezellig”. It’s one of the most used Dutch words and depending on the context it can be translated as a feeling of cosiness, fun or nice atmosphere. It can also indicate a sense of belonging, time spent with loved ones or seeing a friend after a long time. For example: “we have spent a gezellige evening, playing games and having fun...!”

In Catalan, if you want to say that only a few friends came to your birthday party (which hopefully never happens to you!) you could just say “quatre gats” or “four cats” and everything would be clear. So before complaining about your lame party, don’t forget to say “Gràcies!” (thank you) to the four cats who did show up!

“Der er ingen ko på isen” is Danish for “There is no cow on the ice” but its actual meaning is “There is no problem”. So if you don’t see any cows on the ice, everything should be fine. As you have probably noticed, many languages like to use animals in idioms!

The word “alphabet” comes from the first two letters of the Greek alphabet: “alpha” and “beta”. Greeks currently write from left to right, just like other European languages but this wasn’t always the case. In the beginning, it could be written from right to left, and even in alternating directions on each line. On the next page, I’ll show you a funny habit of Greeks’ neighbours...

Finnish is one of the few national languages in Europe that is not Indo-European. It belongs to a family together with Estonian and Hungarian. There are many things you can say in Finnish with just one word. So “istun” would be “I sit down”, “istahtaisin” “I would sit down for a while”, “istahdan” “I’ll sit down for a while” and “istahtaisinkohan” “I wonder if I should sit down for a while”.



Hi! My name is Lara! Come and join me on this fascinating journey across the beautiful languages of Europe... We will start this journey in "krasavik"... Wait. Where? "Krasavik" (April) is the most beautiful month in Belarus and that is why Belarusians have literally named this month "beautiful". And who doesn't love springtime?

In the land of pizza, pasta and cheese, it is no surprise when someone gets "abbioco". There's no exact equivalent in English, but abbiocco (pronounced "ab-byok-ko") refers to a feeling you get after eating a large quantity of food. Turn over to the next page to discover another unique food-related word...

Latvians love to sing! The "dainas" are Latvian folk songs that capture ancient Latvian wisdom. Created well over a thousand years ago, "dainas" were part of celebrations (like the yearly midsummer celebration in the main image), daily work, reflections on life preserved in oral form. There are more than 1.2 million "dainas" altogether!

Maltese is the smallest official EU language in terms of speakers. It sounds similar to the Phoenician language that was spoken in areas around the ancient Mediterranean 3000 years ago. Maltese is the only language in Europe that belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language family and also the only language from this family that uses the Latin alphabet. Turn to the next page and I'll show you a rather isolated language...

Estonian loves vowels! The role of vowels in Estonian is among the greatest in any European language and there are many words like "Jäääär" (the edge of the ice), "Töö-öö" (working night) or "Õueiaääre" (the edge of a fence surrounding a yard)! Now let me show you a language that can make up a whole sentence containing only vowels...

If you are not keen on vowels, Czech might be the language for you! Czech loves consonants. Words made up only of consonants like "krk" (neck), "prst" (finger) or "smrk" (pine tree) are very common. Try saying this Czech tongue twister "Chrt pln skvrn zdrhl z Brd"; meaning "A greyhound full of spots escaped from the Brdy (mountains)". This love of consonants is also shared by a neighbour – can you guess which one?

International Sign language is often used among sign language users from different countries, who don't have a common language – as the name suggests it is an international language. It can be written down in a number of ways. For example, certain symbols are used to describe the handshape and movement of the sign as well as the facial expressions. Since we've talked so much about alphabets...

Lithuanian is one of the oldest spoken languages in the world and even has words which are similar to ancient Sanskrit, such as "vyras" (man), "šuo" (dog), "avis" (sheep). It means that Lithuanians can recognize some words while listening to this Indian language. I'm starting to get hungry, let me grab something to eat...

When Albanians are shaking their head from side to side it does not mean "no" but quite the opposite "right, I agree, I'm listening". Conversely, nodding one's head up and down does not mean "yes". It means "sorry, I'm afraid not" and seems to accompany bad news. So be particularly careful when shaking your head in Albania – you may have just agreed to something you didn't mean to!

There are between 60 and 100 words referring to different types of rain in Galician. If you have been to Galicia, you will know why! For example, "babuña" refers to a rain that sounds like a small baby, "torbón" to a rain with thunder and lightning and "ballón" to a heavy but short-lasting rain that lasts for several days...

Did you know that French has a different way of counting between 70 and 99? So for the number 75 you literally say "60 plus 15". In addition to that, for the number 80 you say "4 times 20"! 96 therefore is "4 times 20 plus 16". French speakers have to be good mathematicians! French is also considered to be one of the most beautiful languages, together with... want to take a guess?

Swedish has invented a perfect word for expressing balance and saying "not too little, not too much... but just the right amount" or in Swedish "lagom". So in Swedish you can nicely say that you have just eaten "lagom"! We talked a lot about unique words, so let's also take a look at some unique expressions...

Serbian is one of the few European languages that uses both Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. Speakers of Serbian can use the two scripts equally well. Among Slavic languages Serbian uses one of the shortest Cyrillic alphabets: it contains 30 letters. Talking of alphabets... Let me show you a language with a very unique alphabet...

We tend to express our reactions with short phrases or words that have no particular meaning. Macedonian have one cool way of doing this – with "lele"! "Lele" can mean "Oh my god!" or "Oh wow!" and you can add as much "le" as you want. So you could say "Le le le le le! What a pretty dog!" Flip over to the next page to discover a language with no "yes" or "no"...

The Romanian language is also very fond of vowels. Romanian can even make up a meaningful sentence consisting only of vowels: "Oaia aia e a ei, eu i-o iau" means "That sheep is hers, I'm taking it". There are also some languages that seem to try to completely avoid vowels...

2 people are very special in Slovene! Not only do you have a singular form and a plural form, but also a form for exactly 2 people! So if you want to say "me and you" you could just say "midva" (we two males or one male and one female), or "midve/medve" (we two females). Talking of numbers... next I want to show you a language with an interesting counting system...

Norwegian has many words that have a 'giant' influence on other more widely spoken languages. Who hasn't heard of a "troll"? If trolls are a bit scary for you (me too!), then think instead of the beautiful Norwegian "fjords" and if those whet your appetite for travel don't forget the word "egg" which is also of Norwegian origin.

Generally languages belong to language families and share many characteristics with others, but Basque is pretty much an only child... It is believed to be one of the oldest European languages and its origins remain a mystery. So, if you want to join an exclusive club and become an "eskalduna" (a Basque speaker) try this language!

German is one of the languages with the longest words. To describe things you simply combine different words so they become a new one. So the word for a qualifying match for the football world cup would be „Fußballweltmeisterschaftsqualifikationsspiel“. Some can be a bit confusing if you don't know which words were combined like "Urinsekten" but I will let you work that out!

Bulgarians also nod for "no" and shake their heads for "yes". Another uncommon characteristic of Bulgarian is that it is one of the few Slavic languages with no cases. So it should be easier to learn than Czech which has 7 cases! Bulgarian shares this characteristic only with Macedonian.

Azerbaijani also uses "o" for he, she and it. But this is not the only thing Turkish and Azerbaijani have in common. Words like "with" or "for" don't come before the noun but after it: so in Azerbaijani "with my mother" would be "anam ilə" or literally "my mother with". Another special feature is that when Azerbaijani is written in Latin or Cyrillic scripts, it is written left-to-right. When written in the Arabic script, it is written right-to-left.

North Sámi is one of the Sami languages and it is spoken in the north European countries. Therefore it is no wonder that it has many words to describe different types of snow and ice. For example, "čáhki" is a hard snowball that is thrown in serious snowball fights, "vahca" is a new or loose snow and "soavli" is a slushy snow.

Russian has one unique word that describes a layer of ice, which settles, then after the rise of temperatures melts and then again freezes again: "Гололедица" (gololedica), which roughly translates a naked sheet of ice. And did you know that there are twice as many native speakers of Russian as there are of English in Europe?

Bosnian is very similar to Croatian and Serbian but you can tell it has a strong connection to Turkish: for around 400 years Bosnia was part of the Ottoman Empire and therefore adopted many loanwords from Turkish such as "minđuše" (earrings), "bujrum" (go ahead) or "avlija" (inner yard).

Yes, Slovak likes consonants, too! Many Slovak words are formed entirely or mostly of consonants, such as the words “vrb” (willow), “štvrť” (quarter) or “smrť” (death). Slovak is also considered to be the language that is easiest for the speakers of other Slavic languages to understand. Flip over to the next page to discover a rather economical language...

Together with Serbian and Bosnian, Croatian is one of the South Slavic languages that have many things in common. These languages are so similar that their speakers can easily understand each other. The shortest Croatian words consist of just one letter – “a” (but, and), “o” (about), “u” (in), “i” (and), “s” (with, from) or “k” (to).

The Georgian word “Shemometchama” means “to eat even though you’re full because the food tastes so good”. It roughly translates to “I accidentally ate the whole thing”. Georgian also has one of the world’s most impressive looking scripts.

On the next page I’ll show you a word that describes an amount that we all want to express from time to time...

Turkish is a language with no gender! There’s a single word for “he”, “she” and “it”, or in fact just a single letter – “o”. So it is possible to describe a person in Turkish without indicating whether it is a boy or a girl. Turn to the next page to see which other language shares this similarity with Turkish...

Iceland does not have close neighbouring countries and the language the Vikings brought in the 9th and 10th centuries has not changed as much as you might imagine over the centuries. Icelandic avoids using foreign words and prefers to form new words from ancient Viking words. So the word for computer “tölva” is formed from the old words “tala” (number) and “völva” (prophetess).

Hungarian is one of the hardest languages to learn due to its 18 grammatical cases and numerous complex rules. But it is well worth the effort as it is very good at capturing special moments with just one word. “Aranyhíd” is literally “a golden bridge” but means a glistening reflection of the sun on the surface of water.

Romansh is the least known of Switzerland’s four official languages. Its history begins before the birth of Christ: the Latin of the Romans, who conquered the area between the Rhaetian Alps and the Danube, mixed with the languages of the local people. Gradually Romansh developed from this mixture – and still continues to change today!

The Welsh “Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogogoch” is the longest place name in Europe and second longest in the world. It approximately means “St. Mary’s church in the hollow of the white hazel near the rapid whirlpool of St Tysilio of the red cave”. Flip over to discover a language which can match Welsh place names in the length of its words...

Polish has many fun idioms. So for example, if you say in Polish “Nie mój cyrk, nie moje małpy” it would literally mean “Not my circus, not my monkeys”, however, the phrase has nothing to do with monkeys but means “It’s not my problem”. There’s another language that has an amusing way of saying something similar...

English is the most spoken language in the world. There are almost 1.3 billion English speakers, but only around one third are native speakers. When we speak the same language, we understand each other and realise how many things we share. Then the world doesn’t seem so big after all.

The Armenian language uses an alphabet that is quite unique compared to other European languages. It was created around 2400 years ago! As Armenians are very proud of their alphabet they even created a monument for their unique characters. Armenia celebrates its own special language day, the Holy Translators Day, in October.

You might not consider Portuguese as being a world language. However, with the whole of Brazil speaking it, there are over 220 million native speakers - it ranks as the 7th most spoken language worldwide! Speakers of Portuguese generally understand Spanish, Galician and Italian as these languages are very similar. Speaking of Galician...