

indigenous vs. autochthonous

~ making a fine distinction ~

For many people, the words “indigenous” and “autochthonous” have the same meaning, and dictionaries typically reflect this. Some writers seem to have a stylistic preference for one word over the other; however, for all writers, “indigenous language” and “autochthonous language” both refer to the native language of an area. Nevertheless, in careful writing about multilingual areas, these two words can be used to make an important distinction, as described below.

An indigenous language of a country is a language which is “native” to that country. The country may be the “birthplace” of the language (e.g., as England is the birthplace of English; or as Papua New Guinea is the birthplace of Tok Pisin). Alternatively, however, the language may be simply a native language of the country's inhabitants. Typically, an indigenous language is one which was spoken in the country before the era of European colonialism.

Although an indigenous language has often been in the country for a very long time, this is not always true. For example, the Bantu languages which are now indigenous to South Africa originally came from West Africa via land migration and diffusion. On the other hand, the Khoisan languages have been spoken in South Africa for a much longer time.

The word “autochthonous” can be used to distinguish the older indigenous languages from the newer indigenous languages. We can think of a country's autochthonous language as being “as old as the hills”. Thus, we might call a Khoisan language an autochthonous language of South Africa, while calling a Bantu language an indigenous language of South Africa. Similarly, standard Japanese and Ainu are both indigenous to Hokkaido; however, because the Ainu language has been spoken in Hokkaido much longer, we may describe Ainu as the autochthonous language of Hokkaido.