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Standard Committee**



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Topic B

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Topic B: Saving the World's Endangered Languages



Topic Overview

"Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going." - Rita Mae Brown

Every language reflects a unique world-view with its own value systems, philosophy and cultural features. The extinction of a language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural knowledge that was embodied within the language for centuries, including historical, spiritual and ecological knowledge that may be essential for the survival of not only its speakers, but also countless others. Just as genetic diversity is vital to the survival of any species, cultural diversity, and the preservation of this diversity, is vital to humanity as a whole.

What are endangered languages?

A language is endangered when its speakers cease to use it, use it in fewer and fewer domains, or stop passing it on to future generations. No single factor determines whether a language is endangered, but UNESCO experts typically consider nine factors all together in order to determine a language's status. These factors are as follows.

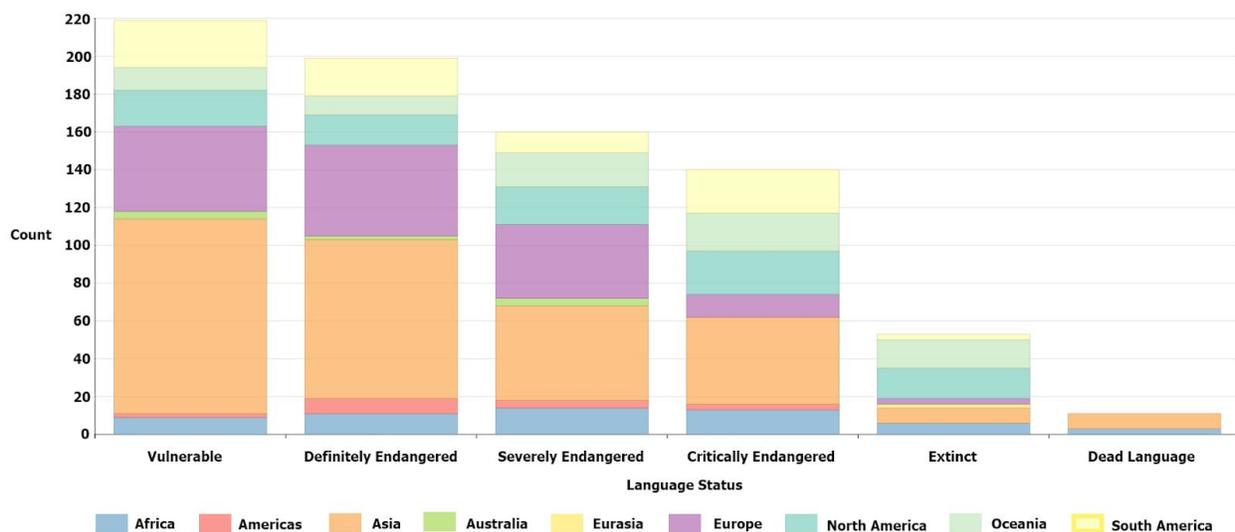
1. Intergenerational Language Transmission (the extent to which languages are passed onto future generations)
2. Number of Speakers
3. Proportion of speakers within the total population
4. Shifts in domains of language use (a change in the locations or situations where the language is used)

5. Response to new domains and media
6. Availability of materials for language education and literacy
7. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies including official status and use
8. Community members' attitudes toward their own language
9. Amount and quality of documentation

Languages can also be categorized into the following five levels of endangerment.

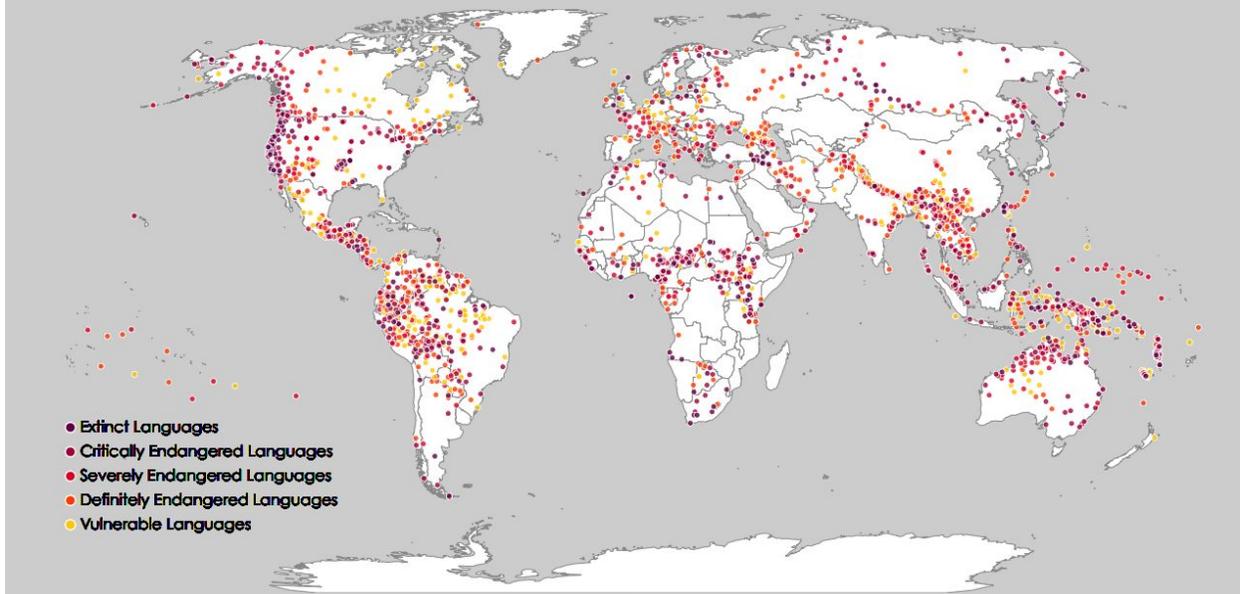
1. Vulnerable - most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (for example speaking at home only)
2. Definitely endangered - children no longer learn the language as a 'mother tongue' in the home
3. Severely endangered - language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves
4. Critically endangered - the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
5. Extinct - there are no speakers left

It is estimated that there are between 6,000 and 7,000 oral languages in the world today. A century from now, however, many of these languages may be extinct. Roughly 97% of the world speaks less than 4% of the world's languages, while the remaining 3% of people speak 96% of the world's languages. This 3% is typically made up of indigenous communities, which is why the issue of endangered languages is so closely linked to indigenous languages and culture. For example, the tribes of Papua New Guinea alone speak as many as 900 languages. According to UN Human Rights experts, 4 in 10 indigenous languages are at risk of disappearing. Some linguists believe the number of languages spoken globally may decrease by half within the next century, while others say the total could fall to mere hundreds as the majority of the world's languages give way to languages like English, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Indonesian, Arabic, Swahili, and Hindi. Other estimates go as far as to claim that 80% of the world's languages may vanish within the next century.



Extinct & Endangered Languages Around the World

Group members: Ming Cheng, Yue Xu, Chawisara Uswachoke



Causes

There are several causes that can lead to language extinction or endangerment. Some are natural causes, such as natural disasters, famine, or disease, which result in population changes that affect the relative presence of languages across the world. There are also manmade causes, such as Genocide or war. When European invaders exterminated the Tasmanians in the early 19th century, an unknown number of languages became extinct as a direct result of the genocide that occurred. Another cause is internal turmoil, such as civil wars. In Nicaragua, the loss of the Mayan languages were caused by the high death toll of the civil war. However, it is far more common that languages become extinct when a community receives pressure from a larger group to integrate into their society. Communities are often pressured to give up their languages and even their ethnic and cultural identities as a result of outside pressure. One prime example is the situation of ethnic Kurds in Turkey, who are forbidden by law to print or formally teach their language. It has also been the case for younger speakers of Native American languages, who, as late as the 1960's, were punished for speaking their native languages at boarding schools. The loss of a language in a community can occur over decades, or within one generation. In Yupik Eskimo communities of Alaska, 20 years ago, all children spoke Yupik. Today, the youngest speaker is in their 20s, and all children speak English. This is largely due to education policies that prioritize English proficiency above a knowledge of multiple languages. Panelists from the HRC and ECOSOC warn that the continued structural discrimination against native speakers in educational and cultural institutions work to undermine and eventually eliminate the culture of entire community or population.

History

The extinction of languages became increasingly common beginning with the colonial era, as certain prominent nations began to seize control of smaller communities, states, and nations. This phenomenon occurred more often in Asia, South America and Africa due to both the high concentration of languages in these areas, as well as the consequences of rapid economic change, often imposed by colonialism. Historically speaking, in colonies and elsewhere where speakers of different languages have come into contact, some languages have been considered superior to others. One language often attained a dominant position in a country. Speakers of endangered languages may themselves come to associate their language with negative concepts such as poverty, illiteracy and social stigma, causing them to adopt the dominant language, which is associated with social and economic progress and modernity.

International Action

The first notable acknowledgement of the right to one's language was within the Declaration of Vienna at the World Conference on Human Rights (1993), which affirmed the right for "persons belonging to minorities to use their own language". The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, written by the Council of Europe, followed in 1995. This was the first legally binding international agreement devoted to protecting the rights of minorities. In 1996, the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights was signed by the PEN club and various NGOs, reaffirming the right of every individual to choose the language they use in public and private spheres. This declaration, also known as the Barcelona Declaration, is yet to receive formal approval by UNESCO.

In 2001, the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity was adopted, emphasizing the benefit of cultural diversity for current and future generations, as well as the need for immediate action towards the protection of this diversity. This commitment was confirmed by the subsequent Action Plan mandated by the Declaration to promote linguistic diversity as part of the world's cultural diversity. Resolution 56/262 12 (Part II) of the General Assembly was passed in 2002, outlining goals of multilingualism as a key effort towards protecting linguistic diversity. In 2003, the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages published its report, establishing a framework for determining language endangerment. Later that same year, the International Expert Meeting of UNESCO Program on Safeguarding Endangered Languages took place, in which regions were analyzed individually in order to determine the most effective ways to safeguard minority languages. Soon after, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted. Intangible Cultural Heritage, in this context, included language, as it was a tradition or practice passed down from generation to generation, and is integral to the cultural preservation of a group or community. The General Assembly of the UN proclaimed 2008 to be the International Year of Languages and named UNESCO as the lead agency for this effort.

Questions to Consider

1. What are some innovative ways to implement the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, specifically regarding the importance of learning of a variety of languages from a young age?
2. We have discussed the social implications of language extinction. What are the long term economic implications, and why would nations be motivated to invest in the preservation of linguistic diversity?
3. What types of organizations, institutions, and groups must be involved in the implementation of language education programs?
4. Which organizations can provide necessary funding to communities that lack strong educational frameworks?
5. Should states be required to cultivate local languages even if that may be detrimental to the economic and social cohesion of the nation, as well as the state's sovereignty?
6. How can nations and international organizations work to combat cultural imperialism?

Helpful Links

1. *List of Endangered Languages, with Classifications:*
 - a. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/apr/15/language-extinct-endangered>
2. *Turning To AI To Save Endangered Languages - Forbes:*
 - a. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/cognitiveworld/2018/11/23/turning-to-ai-to-save-endangered-languages/?sh=5c0d3dcf6f45>
3. *How to Prevent Language Extinction*
 - a. <https://www.technologyreview.com/2010/06/16/202845/how-to-prevent-language-extinction/>
4. *A Model of the Mechanisms of Language Extinction and Revitalization Strategies to Save Endangered Languages*
 - a. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41466658?seq=1>
5. *Why do we Fight so Hard to Preserve Endangered Languages?*
 - a. <https://theweek.com/articles/541609/why-fight-hard-preserve-endangered-languages>
6. *What Protects Minority Languages From Extinction*
 - a. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/04/200422112301.htm>
7. *What is an Endangered Language?*
 - a. <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/what-endangered-language>

References

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/>
<http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/>
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