

Committee/Council: Environmental and Cultural Committee

Issue: Efforts to protect heritage languages

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Position: Chair

Introduction

“When a language dies, a way of understanding the world dies with it, a way of looking at the world.”

- George Steiner

George Steiner’s words are of particular relevance when it comes to the issue at hand. As the professor correctly states, a language is a way of perceiving the world and each time such a language dies, the perception of a culture about the world and its function, the identity, the origin and the tradition of that culture die with it. Thus as Rita Izsák, UN Independent Expert on minority issues, said ‘Protection of minority languages is a human rights obligation’.

Marginalization of minority languages as unimportant (as seen in Kenya with the Yakku language) and globalization are both key factors to the gradual disappearance of heritage and minority languages. As UNESCO estimates half of more than 7,000 languages spoken today (as recorded by the ‘Ethnologue’ project) will be extinct by the end of the century. As a result, the way of these



Map of Europe's language varieties.

cultures to increased autonomy within dominant power structures will be limited, children stemming from such cultures will, most likely, become disengaged as they will no longer be taught in their mother tongue and people of such societies will undergo a change when it comes to their local values. These results among numerous others should become a reason for the global society and private or local

institutions to become actively engaged and invest more effort and funds in the preservation and protection of minority and heritage languages.

Since the Dhaka incident at 21st February 1952 when two Pakistani students were shot and killed by officers while demonstrating for the imposition of Bangla as one of the two national languages in Pakistan, the UN, UNESCO and a vast number of organizations and individuals tried to come up with various solutions on the issue of protecting minority language rights and preserving their existence. Thus the International Mother Language Day(21st February), the resolution of 16th May 2007(A/RES/61/266) ,the enactment of 2008 as the year of languages, the creation of the 'Erasmus+' project and other various projects, declarations, treaties and action plans were established. However there lies the question. Why are minority and heritage languages still endangered after all this effort put by the international community?

Definition of Key-Terms

Heritage

According to the 'Merriam-Webster' web dictionary the word heritage refers to 'the traditions, achievements, beliefs, etc., that are part of the history of a group or nation'. Commonly anything that is passed on by older generations to newer can be considered as heritage.

Language

Based on Shan Wareing's definition of a language, a language is a 'systematic way of combining smaller units into larger units for the purpose of communication'. Such units are the sounds of a language (phonemes), which form words combined in a proper grammatical and syntactic structure in order to express thoughts and ideas. Another definition by the Merriam-Webster dictionary considers the word language as 'the words, their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood by a community'.

Minority Language

A minority language is a language spoken by a limited amount of people in a country or territory. It is not the official language of that country.

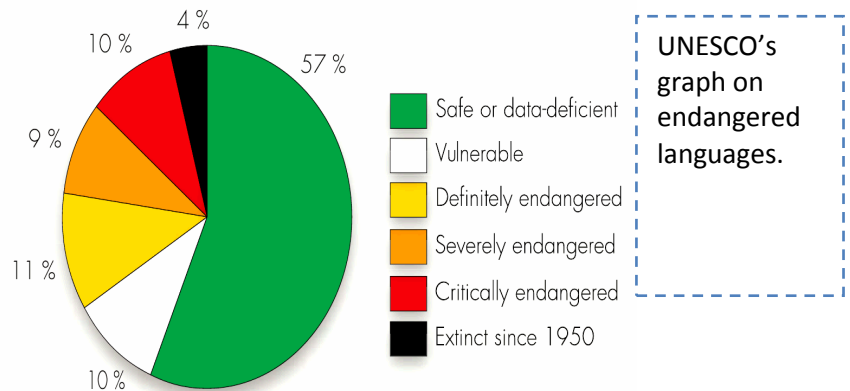
Background Information

Why are heritage languages endangered?

“As a child I had this perception that it was [...] something that was going to pass away. At some point I realized that we have reached this critical point in history and I have asked myself... How did we get here?”

– Barry Moses at a TEDx conference speaking about the endangerment of the Spoken language.

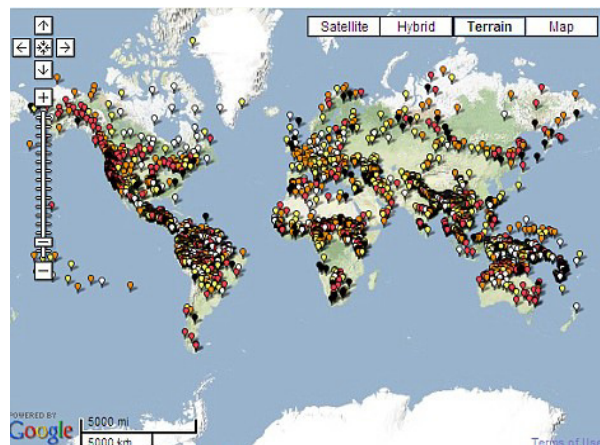
Barry’s realization was more than accurate. Currently about 10 countries including the U.S.A. (191), Brazil (190), India (197), China (144), the Russian Federation (131) and Mexico (143) have more than 100 endangered languages within their territory and more than 200 languages have become extinct throughout the course of the last century. What reason lies in the endangerment of these languages?



The two main reasons why a language can become extinct are *globalization* and *marginalization*.

Globalization

Certainly, there is no shortage of disagreement about the fact that our community is a globalized one. Trade is being conducted all across the globe, people living on different continents can communicate through various online services for free and migration and former colonization has resulted in the mixture of cultures and ethnicities. However globalization did not only have positive results on the society as it hasn't always been conducted peacefully. Societies have been colonized through the use of military force, which has had a great impact on cultural and linguistic diversity. As there have been efforts to establish English, French, Spanish and Chinese as *lingua francas*, small communities have been economically, religiously and culturally subjugated to more



powerful groups and countries. Therefore regional and heritage languages have been abandoned and the abovementioned languages have been imposed.

Marginalization

Communities tend to marginalize their languages as unimportant. They abandon the education on such languages and they converse in other languages apart from their own indigenous and mother language. As a result the heritage language is forgotten, replaced and only spoken by a limited amount of elders.

Why is it important to preserve heritage languages?

A poem crafted by Alitet Nemtushkin comprehensively describes the importance of preserving a local heritage language (Evenki is the heritage language of the poet).

*'If I forget my native speech,
And the songs that my people sing
What use are my eyes and ears?
What use is my mouth?*

*If I forget the smell of the earth
And do not serve it well
What use are my hands?
Why am I living in the world?*

*How can I believe the foolish idea
That my language is weak and poor
If my mother's last words
Were in Evenki?'*

Every language has its own beauty. It is the way that a specific society expresses its cultural identity and the way that its people are identified. If you speak Evenki, you are Evenki, if you speak English, you are English. Each community has a different knowledge, different perception about the world, different traditions, beliefs, history, music and culture. The formation of the language of a community is based on all these trademarks of the community. Therefore the extinction of a language means the extinction of a unique perception about the world, needed for its better understanding.

One practical example on how important a language is also on international level is the Gwich'in tribe in Alaska. The tribe lives in arctic climates and the climate there is rapidly changing. Essential to their survival is the Caribou with which the tribe has a unique relationship. Over the years the tribe has developed a rich vocabulary on their indigenous



The Flag of the Gwich'in Tribe.

Gwich'in language that describes the anatomy of the Caribou. The have observed the animal throughout the centuries, recorded its behavior on a vast variety of occasions, they have developed valuable knowledge on its hunting and even carry out ceremonies and feasts with the caribou as a theme. If, hypothetically, the Gwich'in language became extinct (it is already recorded as endangered) everything the tribe knows about the Caribou would be a part of an unknown history.

Such examples are common throughout the globe and it is our obligation to prevent any harm on languages and cultures that our era brings our may bring. It is our obligation to support such languages with establishment of projects on their preservation

The 'Ethnologue' project

One way of engaging the global community in the preservation of indigenous and heritage languages is raising its awareness. Various awareness campaigns have been carried out, but the most comprehensive and historical project of all is the 'Ethnologue'. It has been updated 12,000 times and is regarded as the world's most comprehensive work of its kind. It lists about 7,100 languages and also contains information about languages that have become extinct since its first publication in 1951. Moreover the 'Ethnologue' project has expanded itself also in the cyberspace with a comprehensive and well developed website that contains information about the current status of a language, language development, language endangerment and also provides its visitors with an efficient search engine on general information about a specific language. What makes the 'Ethnologue' project more fascinating is that it has affiliation from the UN for its research and that it engages thousands of well-known linguists and reporters from all over the world.

The following link contains the website of the Ethnologue:

<http://www.ethnologue.com/>

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

UNESCO

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) is one of the main supporters of the preservation of minority and heritage languages. By having the Education For All (EFA) campaign as a basis UNESCO has been actively engaged in the protection of such languages since 1999. Its first action was to establish the International Mother Language Day as a means of awareness about heritage and minority languages. Moreover UNESCO officials have published numerous reports on such languages among which is the famous publication of the 'Atlas of languages in Danger' and the organization has launched a number of campaigns especially in Latin America and Africa (Regions with the higher language diversity globally). Furthermore UNESCO has supported multilingualism through several normative texts such as the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. A summary of UNESCO's campaign for building intercultural understanding and preserving national identities can be seen on the following video published on the video-sharing platform 'YouTube':

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Q-XozG0RSCo

European Commission

Within the reach of the European Union 60 indigenous regional and minority languages are spoken by 40 million people.

Therefore the European Commission has been funding various projects on the preservation of such languages and has even published the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in 1992. Furthermore the Commission has created a famous



**GIVING REGIONAL
AND MINORITY
LANGUAGES
A SAY!**

Poster of an EC educational campaign.

project called Erasmus+, which has as a primary goal, among others, the learning of regional and minority languages. *The following link contains the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages:*

<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/148.htm>

ACALAN

The African Academy of Language is a UNESCO-backed institution of the African Union which promotes multilingualism in all regions of Africa primarily in the field of education, is active in the protection and preservation African regional languages and especially the ‘vehicular cross-border languages’ as stated by the institution and fights for the eradication of illiteracy in Africa. The institution with the help of UNESCO and the OAU (African Union) has created non-binding resolutions and declarations (Language Plan of Africa 1986, Harare Declaration 1997) at conferences held in cities such as Harare (Zimbabwe), Niamey (Niger), Kampala (Uganda) and Yaoundé (Cameroon). Furthermore ACALAN has established other special institutions such as the Centre of Linguistic and Historical Studies through Oral Tradition (CELHTO) and the Regional Centre of Documentation on Oral Traditions and African Languages (CERDOTOLA). Currently the African Academy of Language has as a main goal, among others, the integration of their efforts in national legislation. *The following link contains the Harare Declaration 1997 and the Language Plan of Africa 1986:*

<https://www0.sun.ac.za/taalsentrum/assets/files/Harare%20Declaration.pdf>

<http://www.bisharat.net/Documents/OAU-LPA-86.htm>

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
1951	The first version of the ‘Ethnologue’ was created
1952	Demonstrations by students for the establishment of Bangla as one of the two national languages in Pakistan, resulted in 2 deaths (Dhaka incident)
1986	The Language Plan of Africa was created by the ACALAN institution
1987	The Erasmus+ project of the EU was established
1992	The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages was introduced

1997	The Harare Declaration was created
2000	UNESCO's Education For All (EFA) campaign began
2001	The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity was drafted
2003	Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
2005	Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions
2007	A/RES/61/266
2008	The International Year of Languages took place
2014	The Erasmus Plus project was launched

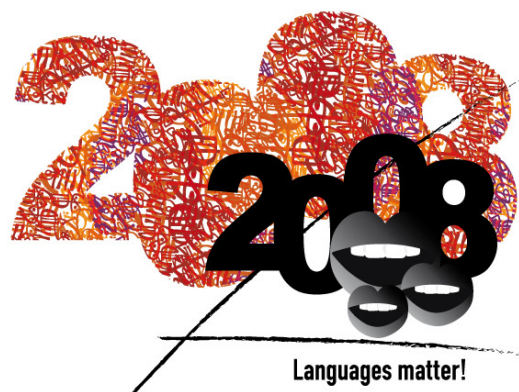
Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions and Events

- [A/RES/61/266\(On Multilingualism\)](#)

Basically this resolution submitted by the UN on 16th May 2007 consists of clauses mainly about the wider use of the 6 primary languages of the UN. Nevertheless this resolution stresses out the importance of language diversity and has also established 2008 as the International Year of Languages, while also encouraging member states to promote the preservation of minority and heritage languages.

- [International Year of Languages](#)

The year of 2008 was the introduction of a six-year period when UNESCO was about to introduce a new strategy on language diversity preservation. As a lead agency of the campaign UNESCO was about to work



Slogan for the International Year of Languages.

(and still works, although the period is over) on a national, regional and local level in cooperation with specialized UN experts, local organizations and institution in order to promote multilingual education for all, the eradication of language barriers through translation of scientific terminology in as many languages and dialects as possible, cultural diversity by the protection of minority languages through publications, translations etc. and the use of heritage languages in the cyberspace.

- 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity

As Koïchiro Matsuura said “The cultural wealth of the world is its diversity in dialogue”. This quote from the Japanese Director-General of UNESCO describes the main vision of the declaration. The document is dedicated to the raise of awareness concerning cultural and linguistic diversity, the exchange of knowledge between various peoples with different cultural values and heritage, the multilinguistic education of children while respecting their mother tongue and integration of the use of communication as a means of preserving the use of the mother tongue and the learning of other languages.

- Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Since the Dhaka Incident the global community has attempted numerous times to preserve minority and heritage languages by conducting research, establishing specialized institutions, raising awareness and promoting the uniqueness of human languages. Mostly UNESCO, ACALAN, the EU, the National Geographic magazine, the UN and numerous individuals working either in projects or by themselves are the ones that fight to preserve such languages.

Examples of such attempts are the ‘Ethnologue’ project, the International Year of Languages, the Education For All campaign, the Language Plan of Africa, the Erasmus+ project, the resolution on multilingualism (A/RES/61/266), the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity among numerous other projects, conventions and events.

Possible Solutions

Although the global community has been particularly active concerning the preservation of minority languages, the danger still exists and there are still some aspects of the issue that are in urgent need of being addressed.

As mentioned earlier in the report due to globalization people tend to marginalize their own language and replace it with other more dominant ones. One possible solution to this specific problem could be to create such conditions so that one's mother tongue and heritage language can seem appealing to one again. Consequently such solutions could be the establishment of a modern educational system in countries with endangered languages promoting the learning of the mother tongue through communication or other forms of social interaction in combination with the classic teaching of grammar, vocabulary and syntax. One more issue that lies in the education of a mother tongue is most of the times the lack of documents, dictionaries and grammar books in heritage languages which will assist this educational system to function.

However languages and cultures accordingly tend also to be marginalized on international and not only on local level. Therefore one other proposal to protect an endangered heritage language would be to use it also on the Internet, on movie productions (eliminate the phenomenon that in movies all characters even from different cultures and ethnicities speak English) and even other forms of entertainment such as video games and TV-shows.

It is however, important to note that there currently some languages are at the brink of extinction with few elders speaking them for which only one thing can be done if every effort to protect them fails. As a language and consequently a culture with its perception about the world are important for its understanding there should be at least recordings of that language so that it does not become lost in history and so that valuable knowledge of the ones speaking can be shared with the global community.

Last but not least when researching to find more solutions on the matter and their implementations you should keep in mind that the UN hasn't yet created a resolution specifically on the issue of protecting endangered heritage and minority languages, but that it has only addressed the issue indirectly.

Videos

In this section you will find attached the links of online videos on the issue of heritage languages.

- 1) <https://youtu.be/T-5HDuhEaDM> (Minority Languages: BBC World's Newsroom, Anne-Marie Tomchak)
- 2) <https://youtu.be/BHIBJGM-XyQ> (Preserving endangered languages: Barry Mosses at TEDxCCS)

- 3) <https://youtu.be/DERu2aAqqWM> (Back to the Future of Endangered Languages | Colleen Fitzgerald | TEDxUTA)
- 4) <https://youtu.be/KB7kLNwKEVU> (Dying Languages)
- 5) <https://youtu.be/Yzt1vEKxX8Q> (What Happens When Languages Become Extinct?)
- 6) <https://youtu.be/uoiUV2FevIM> (BBC World News "Impact": World Mother Language Day and Endangered Languages)
- 7) https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Q-XozG0RSCo (Languages Matter)

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<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/feb/17/languages>

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/resources/periodicals/diversities/past-issues/vol-4-no-2-2002/thematic-introduction/>

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=44352#.ValwrfntlBd>

<http://www.un.org/en/events/iyl/>

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<http://www.ethnologue.com/about>

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/07/vanishing-languages/rymer-text>

<http://www.imo.org/en/OurWork/Conferences/Documents/A.RES.61.266.pdf>

http://www.acalan.org/eng/about_acalan/about_acalan.php

<http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices/>

<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/access-to-knowledge/linguistic-diversity-and-multilingualism-on-internet/atlas-of-languages-in-danger/>

<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/148.htm>

http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/system/ECRML_en.jpg

'Language, Society and Power: An introduction' by Linda Thomas, Shan Wareing, Ishla Singh, Jean Stilwell Peccei, Joanna Thornborrow, Jason Jones 1999

'Language Rights and Language Survival' by Jane Freeland and Donna Patrick 2004