

Forum: Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee
Issue: Fostering the preservation of language
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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, 7,117 languages are spoken worldwide.¹ Although awe-inspiring, this number is constantly subject to variations. Languages are constantly evolving due to a series of linguistic and socio-economic reasons. However, another number that may be just as shocking as the abovementioned one is the fact that 40% of today's worldwide spoken languages are faced with extinction. These statistics have alarmed many individuals, governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and of course the United Nations and its sub-bodies. Languages can be described as a cultural treasure as they carry the

history of thousands of years, whether they are widely spoken or not². This is the reason why many nations are taking action to reverse this dangerous process. With methods, such as language documentation, governments can monitor the existence of lesser known or spoken languages and actually start working towards halting this devastating development. Apart from that, the United Nations and, more specifically, UNESCO have made further



Cartoon portraying the linguistic diversity worldwide.

headway fostering the preservation of these languages. First of all, by declaring 2008 as the International Year of Languages it successfully raised awareness and has consistently continued to do so ever since by documenting various endangered languages and trying to insert them into curricula.

A vital thing that should definitely be taken into consideration when discussing the issue of preserving endangered languages³ is to keep in mind the reasons for which they were enlisted and/or identified as endangered. If the causes are identified, it could be much easier to combat the issue. It is essential to create a friendly societal and linguistic

¹ Works Cited "How Many Languages Are There in the World?" *Ethnologue*, 24 Feb. 2020, www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages.

² "Why Are Languages Worth Preserving?" *SAPIENS*, 20 Mar. 2020, www.sapiens.org/language/endangered-languages/.

³ "Why Are Languages Worth Preserving?" *SAPIENS*, 20 Mar. 2020, www.sapiens.org/language/endangered-languages/.

environment for these languages ensuring the existence of a sufficient number of fluent or capable native speakers of the languages in question.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Endangered Language

An endangered language is defined as a language that will most likely be faced with extinction in the future. That prediction or, in some cases, assumption can stem either from the significantly low number of people actually using it or by signs of its replacement by a modernized version of this language.

Extinct Language

An extinct language is one that is no longer spoken by any part of the world's population and is not being passed on by its native speakers to younger generations. However, an extinct language should not be mistaken for a dead language.

Dead Language

A dead language is one that is still to some extent being taught or used even if there are not any native speakers left. The two most well-known examples of dead language are Latin and Ancient Greek.

Native Speaker

A native speaker is an individual who has spoken a language during his or her early childhood rather than having learnt it as a child or adult. A native speaker's language is most likely either the one spoken by his/her parents or the one of his/her country of origin.

Globalization

The process of a growing integration and reciprocal action between nations, governments and companies across the world.

Multiculturalism

Encyclopedia Britannica defines Multiculturalism as follows: *"the view that cultures, races, and ethnicities, particularly those of minority groups, deserve special acknowledgment of their differences within a dominant political culture."*⁴

Language Revitalization

It is the linguistic process of halting or reversing the extinction of a language.

Intergenerational Language Transmission

It refers to the process of teaching children their native language/or the language of their country of origin with the help of their parents so as to increase the number of speakers of the language in question.

More Economically Developed Countries (MEDCs)

This term and abbreviation refer to countries that have high Gross Domestic Product

⁴ "Multiculturalism." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, www.britannica.com/topic/multiculturalism.

(GDP), high standard of living for their people, high literacy and education rates, and pursue the expansion of manufacturing and service industries.

Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs)

This term and abbreviation refer to countries that generally have low Gross Domestic Product (GDP), low standard of living, high unemployment rate, reduced educational opportunities for their population and generally rely on agriculture.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The reasons behind the extinction of languages.⁵

⁵ Sloman, Alice. "Revitalising Endangered Languages." *Geographical - Geographical Magazine*, www.geographical.co.uk/people/cultures/item/2332-saving-endangered-languages.

Because of the plethora of languages worldwide, the causes to become endangered significantly vary. There are four stages of endangerment, after which a language can become extinct with little to no chances of being “revived”. A typical example is the Tasmanian languages and dialects that became extinct during the 19th century. The same phenomenon took place in the Alaskan communities of Yupik Eskimos when their native language abruptly became extinct. Approximately 22 years ago the Yupik language was spoken by children. Today, however, the new generations of Yupik Eskimos in the area speak only English. A last example of the gradual endangerment of a language is the following:



One of the few speakers of the Mongolian languages which are among the most endangered languages worldwide.

up until the 1940s, the population of the Cape Breton Island and of Nova Scotia spoke their native language, namely Scots Gaelic. However, towards the 1970s children in the aforementioned nations were no longer being taught their native language leading to the acceleration of its gradual endangerment and possibly to its complete extinction. Other concise but important examples are the Native American languages Mohawk and Onondaga found in New York and Canada. These languages may be facing extinction in the near future because of the constantly decreasing number of native speakers. Moreover, the inability of these minorities to provide economic opportunities and the limited environments in which the endangered languages can be used along with the discrimination against their speakers significantly reduce any benefits of learning them. Languages can be pronounced endangered or extinct on the basis of different factors. The most usual one and unfortunately the most relatively obvious is the decreasing number of native speakers. That can be a consequence of not including the native languages in the curricula of the schools and other educational structures. Another factor pertains to the termination of intergenerational language transmission in consequence of societal pressure as, for example, when the parents put pressure on their children to focus on a more dominant and widely spoken language that usually would be more beneficial to them. That can ensure a certain quality of life which may be more than appealing to families living in Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDC's). Another major factor in the endangerment of a language is immigration. Immigrants usually settle into countries where the dominant languages are other than theirs. Therefore, the need for “survival” in the new country may render their native language useless and after some time endangered due the decreasing number of speakers.

How to properly recognize and identify a language under threat of extinction.

As mentioned in my introduction, the best way to foster the preservation of languages is to properly identify the problem. For the exact same reason, the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has created a form of classification system that helps linguists, governments and non-governmental organizations to stay updated on the status of languages worldwide and how they should act based on the

severity of the situation. The classification system is as follows:

- **Vulnerable**
—Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g. home environment).
- **Definitely endangered**
—Children no longer learn the language via intergenerational language transmission.
- **Severely endangered**
—The language is spoken by older generations; however, while they may understand it, they do not use it when speaking to children or among themselves.
- **Critically endangered**
— The speakers of the language are of old age and/or the language is spoken infrequently.
- **Extinct**
—There are no more speakers left.

This is a very helpful and sufficient method to identify the danger a language may be facing, and I am certain it will facilitate the work of the committee, because identifying the severity of the problems a language is confronted with will help us find appropriate and feasible solutions to prevent its extinction.

Why endangered languages are worth preserving.

Gabriela Pérez Báez, a curator of linguistics in the Anthropology Department at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, when interviewed about the importance of linguistic diversity, she said; *“In many ways, language is like a map that shows us how humanity has come to be the way it is.”* That sentence can perfectly sum up the main arguments why fostering the preservation of languages should not be overlooked. Through languages, especially the long-lived ones, we can acquire useful in many aspects information about science, sociology, and human rights issues. More specifically, they usually contain an accumulated body of knowledge, including information about zoology, geography, mathematics, astronomy navigation, pharmacology, botany, meteorology and more. It is an empowering tool, especially for the native speakers of endangered languages.

Moreover, endangered languages are a huge part of world cultural heritage. They serve as strong and influential symbols of a community’s identity. They allow the members of a community to feel included in something that can be described as exclusive to them and be engaged on an intellectual and spiritual level with one another. A unique language, such as the one spoken by Cherokee Native Americans, is special in many aspects since it helps its native speakers express their emotions, engage in conversations, express gratitude or anger in a way different than the average person would. The Cherokee language, for example, differs in many respects from other well-known and widely spoken languages. Words, like “goodbye”, and phrases, like “I am sorry,” are not included in its vocabulary. On the other hand, there is a word, which stands out and describes the feeling that overcomes someone seeing a baby. Words like that are unique to many endangered or extinct languages. Thus, it is vital to preserve not only them but also the cultures that support them.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

People's Republic of China

People's Republic of China is a big nation with a plethora of languages and dialects. As a country facing the possible extinction of 100 of the aforementioned languages, it has taken many steps so as to prevent that from happening. The autonomous regions, with each one having its own curricula, help Chinese authorities gain control over legislations and do anything possible to preserve their endangered languages.

Brazil

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Brazil has approximately 200 languages that are endangered. In order to prevent their complete extinction, Brazil has undertaken many initiatives conducted by various governmental organizations. These consist of documentation programs that help keeping track of many languages, especially those spoken in the Amazon Rainforest. However, Brazil is in dire need of assistance throughout this process, because of its weak financial situation.

India⁶

India has more endangered languages than any other country



Chart showing that India has the largest number of endangered languages.

With 197 endangered languages, India occupies the first place in the world in front of the US (191), Brazil (190) and China (144). The Indian government has acted via many governmentally funded initiatives that help preserve these languages. The purpose of the above-mentioned initiatives is to document, archive, and further study any lesser known languages or those that are currently endangered or will possibly be endangered in the future. Lastly, the Indian government also provides funding to universities for researching and studying indigenous and endangered languages in the country.

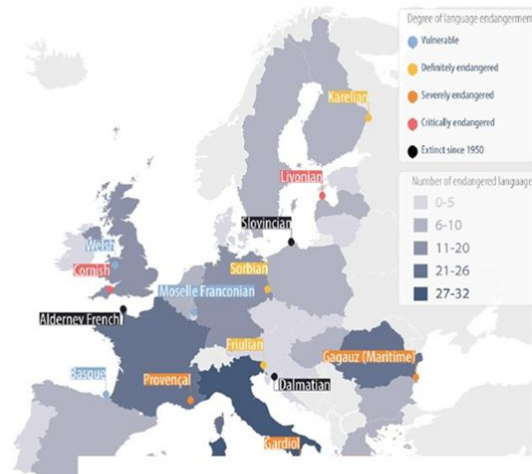
United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, dialects, such as Scottish Gaelic, Irish Gaelic, and Welsh, are threatened with extinction. Moreover, Cornish, which was an extinct language by the 18th century went through a process of revitalization and is no longer extinct.

⁶ "Seven Decades After Independence, Many Small Languages in India Face Extinction Threat." *The Economic Times*, 13 Aug. 2017, www.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/seven-decades-after-independence-many-small-languages-in-india-facing-extinction-threat/articleshow/60038323.cms?from=mdr.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO plays a significant role in preserving endangered languages.⁷ 2008 was pronounced the International Year of Languages and furthermore they have managed to detect and “revive” endangered and/or extinct language by documenting, studying and further adding them to school curricula, and raising awareness on this issue.



Map showing endangered languages across Europe and the level of severity of their endangerment.

Permanent International Committee of Linguistics (CIPL)

The Permanent International Committee of Linguistics consists of experts on the topic at hand, as well as of linguists who exchange opinions on this matter in order to help better the situation on preserving endangered languages.

Foundation for Endangered Languages

The Foundation for Endangered Languages supports the documentation, protection and promotion of endangered languages. In order to achieve that, this non-governmental organization uses means, such as raising awareness and helping educational institutions insert them into their curricula.

European Language Equality Network

The European Language Equality Network is a non-governmental organization (NGO) striving to promote and protect lesser-known European languages and dialects, as well as achieving linguistic equality. They have worked on detecting languages that may be endangered and try to inform the public via seminars.

⁷ "Endangered Languages in the EU." *European Parliamentary Research Service Blog*, 25 Sept. 2018, www.epthinktank.eu/2018/09/26/remaining-united-in-diversity-thanks-to-multilingualism/endangered-languages-in-the-eu-3/.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

| DATE | DESCRIPTION OF EVENT |
|------------------|---|
| 1994 | The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) publish the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, which counts as the first recognition of the issue of language endangerment on an international scale. |
| 20 February 2003 | The United Nations General Assembly proclaims the 21st of May as the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development in a Resolution on "Culture and Development." |
| 20 October 2005 | The Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression is ratified and aims to preserve cultural diversity, including societal phenomena, such as languages. |
| 2008 | The General Assembly announces the International Year of Languages. |
| 2014 | The first language documentation program, which is still operating till today, is founded in New York City. |
| 2018 | The Cambridge Endangered Languages and Culture Group (CELC) starts to look into preserving languages by documenting them and having experts share their views on the process. |

RELEVANT UN RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity stresses the importance of linguistic diversity.

The UN Resolution 56/262

stresses the need for urgent action in order to promote linguistic diversity, since the latter constitutes a great part of the world's cultural diversity.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/65/311

United Nations Resolution on Multilingualism and the importance of preserving it.

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 73/156

This Resolution declares the year 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, thus raising awareness on the issue.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO RESOLVE THE ISSUE

As previously mentioned, there have been several documentation programs. Those were conducted either by non-governmental organizations (NGO's), governmental organizations or United Nations Sub-Bodies. Their purpose was to document lesser known languages worldwide in order to promote their preservation. With means, such as Language Revitalization and Intergenerational Language Transmission, many institutes have managed to revive several languages or halt their extinction.



Painting depicting individuals from different cultures in traditional clothing from previous centuries showing the diversity of endangered languages.

In modern societies, where everything is dominated by technology, it would be expected that many documentation programs would have been completed or governments would have explored various ways to “revive” indigenous languages.⁸ Efforts, such as the one from the First People's Cultural Council (FPCC), which created an app designed to have keyboards consisting of 100 endangered languages, are very important, although accessibility to this app and other technological projects by the FCC is extremely limited because of the lack of the Internet mostly in many Least Economically Developed Countries (LEDC's).

⁸ "Using Technology to Save Endangered Languages • EWCed •." *EWCed*, 14 Aug. 2019, www.ed.everwideningcircles.com/saving-endangered-languages-with-technology/.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

As you have probably already perceived, many states, such as the People's Republic of China, the native languages of which are on the edge of extinction, have taken steps to create legislation that would help foster the preservation of indigenous or endangered languages. However, many of these legislations are either too vague or sometimes too specific, which means they may be applicable only to a particular situation. Thus, in order to tackle the specific linguistic problems each nation faces, more sufficient legislation on preserving languages is needed.

Now, more than ever, the new generations are familiar with technology that could be used as an advantage in the preservation of native and/or endangered languages. It would be more than beneficial to digitalize all these languages. The use of apps that combine audio, video, and educational courses could help build a modernized learning environment for youth and adults. Moreover, it could help combat the stereotype that native or endangered languages are antique and not modern.

Last but not least, a rather simple solution is to integrate languages on the edge of extinction into school curricula so as to ensure that new generations will speak them and halt their extinction. More precisely, in the case of Welsh dialect, the authorities have translated all new legislations and signs, such as the street signs, into this dialect in order to integrate it into everyday life of the citizens.

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