

Language Vitality and Endangerment

**UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit's
Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages**

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Language diversity is essential to the human heritage. Each and every language² embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people. The loss of any language is thus a loss for all humanity.

Though approximately six thousand languages still exist, many are under threat. There is an imperative need for language documentation, new policy initiatives, and new materials to enhance the vitality of these languages.

The cooperative efforts of language communities, language professionals, NGOs and governments will be indispensable in countering this threat. There is a pressing need to build support for language communities in their efforts to establish meaningful new roles for their endangered languages.

**I speak my favourite language
because
that's who I am.**

**We teach our children our favourite language,
because
we want them to know who they are.**

(Christine Johnson, Tohono O'odham elder, American Indian Language Development Institute, June 2002)

¹ This document was prepared by the UNESCO Ad hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (Matthias Brenzinger and Akira Yamamoto, co-chairs; Noriko Aikawa, Dmitri Koundiuba and Anahit Minasyan, UNESCO; Arianne Dwyer, Colette Grinevald, Michael Krauss, Osahito Miyaoka, Osamu Sakiyama, Rieks Smeets, and Ofelia Zepeda). This document results from the work of many people (listed in Appendix 2) and has undergone many revisions. We acknowledge the support of the Japanese Education Ministry's (MEXT, Monbu-kagaku-sho) Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research on Priority Areas *Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim* (Osahito Miyaoka, director) which was essential to the present document.

² Throughout this document, the term *language* include sign language, and *speech* or *endangered-language communities* also refer also to sign language communities.

I. Preamble

A language is *endangered* when it is on a path toward extinction. Without adequate documentation, a language that is extinct can never be revived.

A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, adults or children.

About 97% of the world's people speak about 4% of the world's languages; and conversely, about 96% of the world's *languages* are spoken by about 3% of the world's *people* (Bernard 1996: 142). Most of the world's language heterogeneity, then, is under the stewardship of a very small number of people..

Even languages with many thousands of speakers are no longer being acquired by children; at least 50% of the world's more than six thousand languages are losing speakers. We estimate that, in most world regions, about 90% of the languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the 21st century.

Language endangerment may be the result of *external* forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation, or it may be caused by *internal* forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language. Internal pressures often have their source in external ones, and both halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. Many indigenous peoples, associating their disadvantaged social position with their culture, have come to believe that their languages are not worth retaining. They abandon their languages and cultures in hopes of overcoming discrimination, to secure a livelihood, and enhance social mobility, or to assimilate to the global marketplace.

The extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical, and ecological knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world. Thus, the knowledge of any single language may be the key to answering fundamental questions of the future. Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in the structure and function of human language, human prehistory, and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystems. Above all, speakers of these languages may experience the loss of their language as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity (Bernard 1992, Hale 1998).

Raising awareness about language loss and language diversity will only be successful when meaningful contemporary roles for minority languages can be established, for the requirements of modern life within the community as well as in national and international contexts. Meaningful contemporary roles include the use of these languages in everyday life, commerce, education, writing, the arts, and/or the media. Economic and political support by both local communities and national governments are needed to establish such roles.

There is an urgent need in almost all countries for more reliable information about the situation of the minority languages as a basis for language support efforts at all levels.

II. Background

UNESCO's Constitution includes the maintenance and perpetuation of language diversity as a basic principle:

to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world without distinction of race, sex, language, religion, by the Charter of the United Nations (UNESCO Constitution Article 1).

“Based on this principle, UNESCO has developed programs aimed at promoting languages as instruments of education and culture, and as significant means through which to participate in national life” (Mme. Noriko Aikawa, Head of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Unit, 2001: 13).

Among these programs was the project *The Red Book of Languages in Danger of Disappearing*. The purpose of that project was:

1. to systematically gather information on endangered languages (including their status and the degree of urgency for undertaking research);
2. to strengthen research and the collection of materials relating to endangered languages for which little or no such activities have been undertaken to date, and that belong to a specific category such as language isolates, languages of special interest for typological and historical-comparative linguistics, and are in imminent danger of extinction;
3. to undertake activities aiming to establish a world-wide project committee and a network of regional centres as focal points for large areas on the basis of existing contacts; and
4. to encourage publication of materials and the results of studies on endangered languages.

One crucial goal, however, is missing from the Red Book project – that is, to *work with* the endangered-language communities toward language maintenance, development, revitalization, and perpetuation. Any research in endangered language communities must be reciprocal and collaborative. Reciprocity here entails researchers not only offering their services as a quid pro quo for what they receive from the speech community, but being more actively involved with the community in designing, implementing, and evaluating their research projects.

At the 31st Session of the UNESCO General Conference (October 2001), the unanimously-adopted *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* recognized a

relationship between biodiversity, cultural diversity, and linguistic diversity. UNESCO's action plan recommends that Member States, in conjunction with speaker communities, undertake steps to ensure:

1. sustaining the linguistic diversity of humanity and giving support to expression, creation, and dissemination of the greatest possible number of languages;
2. encouraging linguistic diversity at all levels of education, wherever possible, and fostering the learning of several languages from the youngest age;
3. incorporating, where appropriate, traditional pedagogies into the education process with a view to preserving and making full use of culturally-appropriate methods of communication and transmission of knowledge; and where permitted by speaker communities, encouraging universal access to information in the public domain through the global network, including promoting linguistic diversity in cyberspace.

III. Supporting Endangered Languages

3.1 The Role of the Speech Community

In all parts of the world, members of ethnolinguistic minorities are increasingly abandoning their native language in favour of another language, including in childrearing and formal education.

Among ethnolinguistic communities, a variety of opinions on the future prospects of their languages can be observed. Some speakers of endangered languages come to consider their own language backward and impractical. Such negative views are often directly related to the socioeconomic pressure of a dominant speech community. Other speakers of endangered languages, however, attempt to directly counter these threats to their language, and commit themselves to language stabilization and revitalization activities. These communities may establish environments such as daycare centers, schools, or at least classes in which their languages are exclusively spoken.

In the end, it is the speakers, not outsiders, who maintain or abandon languages. Still, if communities ask for support to reinforce their threatened languages, language specialists should make their skills available to and work with these ethnolinguistic minorities.

3.2 External Specialists and Speech Communities

External language specialists, primarily linguists, educators, and activists see their first task as documentation. This includes the collection, annotation, and analysis of data from endangered languages. The second task entails their active participation in educational programs. Speakers increasingly demand control over the terms and conditions that govern research; furthermore, they claim rights to the outcomes and future uses of the research.

Increasing numbers of people in ethnolinguistic minorities also make demands on research: first, they demand control over the terms and conditions that govern research; second, they claim rights to the outcomes and future uses of the research. (They want, for example, the right to informed consent and to veto power, they want to know how results will benefit them, and they want to be able to determine how research results will be disseminated. But above all, they want an *equal relationship* with outside researchers and want to be actors in a process that is theirs, not someone else's.)

3.3 What Can Be Done?

Just as speech community members react differently to language endangerment, so do linguists, educators, and activists to requests for assistance by speech communities. Such requests relate mainly to five essential areas for sustaining endangered languages:

1. **Basic linguistic and pedagogical training:** providing language teachers with training in basic linguistics, language teaching methods and techniques, curriculum development, and teaching materials development.
2. **Sustainable development in literacy and local documentation skills:** training local language workers to develop orthographies if needed, read, write, and analyse their own languages, and produce pedagogical materials. One of the effective strategies here is the establishment of local research centres, where speakers of endangered languages will be trained to study, document and archive their own language materials. Literacy is useful to the teaching and learning of such languages.
3. **Supporting and developing national language policy:** National language policies must support diversity, including endangered languages. More social scientists and humanists, and speakers of endangered languages themselves should be actively involved in the formulation of national language policies.
4. **Supporting and developing educational policy:** In the educational sector, a number of linguists are engaged in implementing increasingly popular mother tongue education programs. Since 1953 and especially in the past 15 years, UNESCO has been instrumental in this development through its policy statements. So-called mother tongue education, however, often does not refer to education in the ancestral languages of ethnolinguistic minorities (i.e. endangered languages), but rather to the teaching of these languages as school subjects. The most common educational model for teaching ethnolinguistic minority children in schools still uses locally or nationally dominant languages as media of instruction. Teaching exclusively in these languages supports their spread, at the expense of endangered languages. For example, fewer than 10% of the approximately 2000 African languages are currently used in teaching, and none of these 10% is an endangered language. We favour the inclusion of regional languages (often called “mother tongues”) in formal education, but not at the expense of ethnolinguistic minorities (*The Hague Recommendations on the Educational Rights of National*

Minorities 1996; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). A great deal of research shows that acquiring bilingual capability need in no way diminish competence in the official language.

- 5. Improving living conditions and respect for the human rights of speaker communities:** Language documenters, though not directly involved in economic and social development, can help governments identify overlooked populations. For example, national HIV/AIDS awareness or poverty-alleviation programs often do not consider minority communities, especially if they are illiterate. Linguists and educators can be vital mediators by supporting the communities in formulating claims about their linguistic and other human rights. Conversely, materials such as those on health care, community development, or language education produced for these marginalized communities require specialist input. Concepts and content need to be conveyed in a culturally meaningful way.

3.4 Linguistic Diversity and Ecodiversity

Among the 900 ecoregions of the world that WWF has mapped out, 238 (referred to as Global 200 Ecoregions) are found to be of the utmost importance for the maintenance of the world's ecological viability. Within these Global 200 Ecoregions, we find a vast number of ethnolinguistic groups. These are the peoples who have accumulated rich ecological knowledge in their long history of living in their environment.

Conservation biology needs to be paralleled by conservation linguistics. Researchers are exploring not just the parallels, but the links between the world's biodiversity and linguistic/cultural diversity, as well as the causes and consequences of diversity loss at all levels. This connection is significant in itself, because it suggests that the diversity of life is made up of diversity in nature, culture, and language. This has been called *biocultural diversity* by Luisa Maffi; and Michael Krauss has introduced the term *logosphere* to describe the web linking the world's languages (analogous to *biosphere*, the web linking the world's ecosystems; Maffi, Krauss, and Yamamoto 2001: 74).

3.5 Salvage Documentation

A language that can no longer be maintained, perpetuated, or revitalized still merits the most complete documentation possible. This is because each language embodies unique cultural and ecological knowledge in it. It is also because languages are diverse. Documentation of such a language is important for several reasons: 1) it enriches the human intellectual property, 2) it presents a cultural perspective that may be new to our current knowledge, and 3) the process of documentation often helps the language resource person to re-activate the linguistic and cultural knowledge.

IV. Assessing Language Endangerment and Urgency for Documentation

4.1 A Caveat

No single factor alone can be used to assess a language's vitality or its need for documentation. Language communities are complex and diverse; even assessing the number of actual speakers of a language is difficult. We identify six factors to evaluate a language's vitality and state of endangerment, two factors to assess language attitudes, and one factor to evaluate the urgency for documentation. Taken together, these nine factors are especially useful for characterizing a language's overall sociolinguistic situation.

4.2 Language Vitality Assessment

4.2.1 Major Evaluative Factors of Language Vitality

Below we explain the six major factors identified: 1) Intergenerational Language Transmission; 2) Absolute Number of Speakers; 3) Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population; 4) Trends in Existing Language Domains; 5) Response to New Domains and Media; and 6) Materials for Language Education and Literacy. Note that *none of these factors should be used alone*. A language that is ranked highly according to one criterion may deserve immediate and urgent attention due to other factors.

Factor 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission

The most commonly used factor in evaluating the vitality of a language is whether or not it is being transmitted from one generation to the next (Fishman 1991). Endangerment can be ranked on a continuum from stability to extinction. Even “safe” (below), however, does not guarantee language vitality, because at any time speakers may cease to pass on their language to the next generation. Six degrees of endangerment may be distinguished with regards to Intergenerational Language Transmission:

Safe (5): The language is spoken by *all generations*. There is no sign of linguistic threat from any other language, and the intergenerational transmission of the language seems uninterrupted.

Stable yet threatened (5-): The language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission, yet multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant language(s) has usurped certain important communication contexts. Note that multilingualism alone is not necessarily a threat to languages.

Unsafe (4): Most but not all children or families of a particular community speak their language as their first language, but it may be restricted to specific social domains (such as at home where children interact with their parents and grandparents).

Definitively endangered (3): The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the *parental generation*. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.

Severely endangered (2): The language is *spoken* only by *grandparents and older generations*; while the parent generation may still *understand* the language, they typically do not speak it to their children.

Critically endangered (1): The youngest speakers are in the *great-grandparental generation*, and the language is not used for everyday interactions. These older people often *remember* only part of the language but *do not use* it, since there may not be anyone to speak with.

Extinct (0): There is no one who can speak or remember the language.

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population
<i>safe</i>	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
<i>unsafe</i>	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.
<i>definitively endangered</i>	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
<i>severely endangered</i>	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.
<i>critically endangered</i>	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of great-grandparental generation.
<i>extinct</i>	0	There exists no speaker.

Factor 2: Absolute Number of Speakers

It is impossible to provide a valid interpretation of absolute numbers, but a small speech community is always at risk. A small population is much more vulnerable to decimation (e.g. by disease, warfare, or natural disaster) than a larger one. A small language group may also merge with a neighbouring group, losing its own language and culture.

Factor 3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

The number of speakers in relation to the total population of a group is a significant indicator of language vitality, where “group” may refer to the ethnic, religious, regional, or national group with which the speaker community identifies. The following scale can be used to appraise degrees of endangerment.

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Proportion of Speakers Within the Total Reference Population
<i>safe</i>	5	All speak the language.
<i>unsafe</i>	4	Nearly all speak the language.
<i>definitively endangered</i>	3	A majority speak the language.
<i>severely endangered</i>	2	A minority speak the language.
<i>critically endangered</i>	1	Very few speak the language.
<i>extinct</i>	0	None speak the language.

Factor 4: Trends in Existing Language Domains

Where, with whom, and the range of topics for which a language is used directly affects whether or not it will be transmitted to the next generation.

Universal use (5): The language of the ethnolinguistic group is the language of interaction, identity, thinking, creativity, and entertainment, and is actively used in all discourse domains for all purposes.

Multilingual parity (4): One or more dominant languages, rather than the language of the ethnolinguistic group, is/are the primary language(s) in most official domains: government, public offices, and educational institutions. The language in question, however, may well continue to be integral to a number of public domains, especially in traditional religious institutions, local stores, and those places where members of the community socialize. The coexistence of the dominant and non-dominant languages results in speakers’ using each language for a different function (*diglossia*), whereby the non-dominant language is used in informal and home contexts and the dominant language is used in official and public contexts. Speakers may consider the dominant language to be the language of social and economic opportunity. However, older members of the community may continue to use only their own minority language. Note that multilingualism, common throughout the world, does not necessarily lead to language loss.

Dwindling domains (3): The non-dominant language loses ground and, at home, parents begin to use the dominant language in their everyday interactions with their children, and children become *semi-speakers* of their own language (*receptive bilinguals*). Parents and older members of the community tend to be productively bilingual in the dominant and indigenous languages: they understand and speak both. Bilingual children may exist in families where the indigenous language is actively used.

Limited or formal domains (2): The non-dominant language is used only in highly formal domains, as especially in ritual and administration. The language may also still be used at the community centre, at festivals, and at ceremonial occasions where these older members of the community have a chance to meet. The limited domain may also include homes where grandparents and other older extended family members reside, and other traditional gathering places of the elderly. Many people can understand the language but cannot speak it.

Highly limited domain (1): The non-dominant language is used in very restricted domains at special occasions, usually by very few individuals in a community, e.g. ritual leaders on ceremonial occasions. Some other individuals may remember at least some of the language (*rememberers*).

Extinct (0): The language is not spoken at any place at any time.

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Domains and Functions
<i>universal use</i>	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions
<i>multilingual parity</i>	4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.
<i>dwindling domains</i>	3	The language is in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.
<i>limited or formal domains</i>	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions
<i>highly limited domains</i>	1	The language is used only in a very restricted domains and for a very few functions
<i>extinct</i>	0	The language is not used in any domain and for any function.

Note that multilingualism is a fact of life in most areas of the world. Speakers do *not* have to be monolingual for their language to be vital. It is crucial that the indigenous language serve a *meaningful function* in culturally important domains.

Factor 5: Response to New Domains and Media

New areas for language use may emerge as community living conditions change. While some language communities do succeed in expanding their own language into the new domain, most do not. Schools, new work environments, new media, including broadcast media and the Internet, usually serve only to expand the scope and power of the dominant language at the expense of endangered languages. Although no existing domains of the endangered language may be lost, the use of the dominant language in the new domain has mesmerizing power, as with television.

If the communities do not meet the challenges of modernity with their language, it becomes increasingly irrelevant and stigmatised.

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	New Domains and Media Accepted by the Endangered Language
<i>dynamic</i>	5	The language is used in all new domains.
<i>robust/active</i>	4	The language is used in most new domains.
<i>receptive</i>	3	The language is used in many domains.
<i>coping</i>	2	The language is used in some new domains.
<i>minimal</i>	1	The language is used only in a few new domains.
<i>inactive</i>	0	The language is not used in any new domains.

The type and use of these new domains will vary according to the local context. One example of the possible use of this criterion is: an endangered language enjoys one new domain, broadcast media, including radio and television, but only for a half-hour a week. Though the availability of these media gives the language a potentially high ranking, the extreme time limitation results in limited exposure to the language, which thus would rank only a 2 or 3. Inevitably, there will be different levels of achievement in different media.

In education, assigning criteria can be based on two dimensions: up to what level, and how broadly across the curriculum, the endangered language is used. An endangered language which is the medium of instruction for all courses and at all levels will rank much higher than an endangered language that is taught only one hour per week.

All new domains, be they in employment, education, or the media, must be considered together when assessing an endangered language community's response.

Factor 6: Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Education *in* the language is essential for language vitality. There are language communities that maintain strong oral traditions, and some do not wish their language to be written. In other communities, literacy in their language is a source of pride. In general, however, literacy is directly linked with social and economic development. Needed are books and materials on all topics for various ages and language abilities.

Grade	Accessibility of Written Materials
5	There is an established orthography, literacy tradition with grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and everyday media. Writing in the language is used in administration and education.
4	Written materials exist, and at school, children are developing literacy in the language. Writing in the language is not used in administration.
3	Written materials exist and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media.
2	Written materials exist, but they may only be useful for some members of the community; and for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum.
1	A practical orthography is known to the community and some material is being written.
0	No orthography available to the community.

4.2.2 Language Attitudes and Policies

The maintenance, promotion, or abandonment of non-dominant languages may be dictated by the dominant linguistic culture, be it regional or national. The linguistic ideology of a state may inspire linguistic minorities to mobilize their populations toward the maintenance of their languages, or may force them to abandon them. These linguistic attitudes can be a powerful force both for promotion and loss of their languages.

Members of the dominant culture shape the ideological environment, propagating a value system in which their own language is seen as a positive asset, and believed to be a unifying symbol for the region or state. When several larger linguistic communities compete for the same political or social space, they may each have their own conflicting linguistic attitudes. This leads to the general perception that multiple languages cause divisiveness and are a threat to national unity. The fostering of a single dominant

language is one attempt to deal with this *real* or *merely perceived* threat. In doing so, the governing body may legislate the use of language. Accordingly, the policies may discourage or even prohibit the use of other languages. National policy, including the lack of overt policy, has in any case a direct impact on the language attitude of the community itself.

4.2.2.1 Language Attitudes and Policies: Dominant and Non-dominant Language Communities

A country's government may have an explicit language use policy for its multiple languages. At one extreme, one language may be designated as the sole official language of the country, while all others are condemned. At the other extreme, all languages of a nation may receive equal official status. Equal legal status, however, does not guarantee language maintenance and long-term vitality of a language.

Factor 7: Official Status and Use: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes And Policies

Governments and institutions have explicit policies and/or implicit attitudes toward the dominant and subordinate languages.

Equal support (5): All of a country's languages are valued as assets. All languages are protected by law, and the government encourages the maintenance of all languages by implementing explicit policies.

Differentiated support (4): Non-dominant languages are explicitly protected by the government, but there are clear differences in the contexts in which the dominant/official language(s) and non-dominant (protected) language(s) are used. The government encourages ethnolinguistic groups to maintain and use their languages, most often in private domains (as the home language), rather than in public domains (e.g. in schools). Some of the domains of non-dominant language use enjoy high prestige (e.g. at ceremonial occasions).

Passive assimilation (3): The dominant group is indifferent as to whether or not minority languages are spoken, as long as the dominant group's language is the language of interaction. Though this is not an explicit language policy, the dominant group's language is the *de facto* official language. Most domains of non-dominant language use do not enjoy high prestige.

Active assimilation (2): The government encourages minority groups to abandon their own languages by providing education for the minority group members in the dominant language. Speaking and/or writing in non-dominant languages is not encouraged.

Forced assimilation (1): The government has an explicit language policy declaring the dominant group’s language to be the only official national language, while the languages of subordinate groups are neither recognized nor supported.

Prohibition (0): Minority languages are prohibited from use in any domain. Languages may be tolerated in private domains.

Degree of Support	Grade	Official Attitudes toward Language
<i>equal support</i>	5	All languages are protected.
<i>differentiated support</i>	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.
<i>passive assimilation</i>	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.
<i>active assimilation</i>	2	Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.
<i>forced assimilation</i>	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor protected.
<i>prohibition</i>	0	Minority languages are prohibited.

Factor 8: Community Members’ Attitudes toward Their Own Language

Members of a speech community are not usually neutral towards their own language. They may see it as essential to their community and identity and promote it; they may use it without promoting it; they may be ashamed of it and, therefore, not promote it; or they may see it as a nuisance and actively avoid using it.

When members’ attitudes towards their language are very positive, the language may be seen as a key symbol of group identity. Just as people value family traditions, festivals and community events, members of the community may see their language as a cultural core value, vital to their community and ethnic identity. If members view their language as hindrance to economic mobility and integration into mainstream society, they may develop negative attitudes toward their language.

Grade	Community Members' Attitudes toward Language
5	<i>All</i> members value their language and wish to see it promoted.
4	<i>Most</i> members support language maintenance.
3	<i>Many</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
2	<i>Some</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
1	Only <i>a few</i> members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
0	<i>No one</i> cares if the language is lost; all prefer to use a dominant language.

4.2.2.2 Language Attitudes and Policies: Interaction and Social Effects

Attitudes towards the language, be they positive, indifferent, or negative, interact with governmental policy and societal pressures to result in increased or decreased language use in different domains.

In many cases, community members abandon their language because they believe they have no alternative, or because they do not have enough knowledge about the long-term consequences of the “choices” they make. People in such a situation have often been presented with an either-or choice (“either you cling to your mother-tongue and identity but don’t get a job,” or “you leave your language and have better chances in life”). Actually, maintaining and using both languages will allow even better chances in life.

When languages have an unequal power relationship, members of the subordinate group usually speak both their native language and the dominant language. Speakers may gradually come to use only the dominant language. On the other hand, the subordinate group may resist linguistic domination and mobilize its members to revitalize or fortify their language. Strategies for such linguistic activism must be tailored to the particular sociolinguistic situation, which generally is one of three types:

- a. Language Revival: re-introducing a language that has been in limited use for some time, such as Hebrew after the creation of the state of Israel, or Gaelic in Ireland;
- b. Language Fortification: increasing the presence of the non-dominant language to counterbalance a perceived linguistic threat of a dominant language, such as Welsh;
- c. Language Maintenance: supporting the stable use, in speaking and in writing (where orthographies exist), of the non-dominant language in a region or state

with both multilingualism and a dominant language (lingua franca), such as Maori in New Zealand.

For language vitality, speakers ideally not only strongly value their language, but they also know in which social domains their language is to be supported. A positive attitude is critical for the long-term stability of a language.

4.2.3 Urgency for Documentation

Factor 9: Amount and Quality of Documentation

As a guide for assessing the urgency for documenting a language, the type and quality of existing language materials must be identified. Of central importance are written texts, including transcribed, translated, and annotated audiovisual recordings of natural speech. Such information importantly helps members of the language community formulate specific tasks, and enables linguists to design research projects together with members of the language community.

Nature of Documentation	Grade	Language Documentation
<i>superlative</i>	5	There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts; constant flow of language materials. Abundant annotated high-quality audio and video recordings exist.
<i>good</i>	4	There are one good grammar and a number of adequate grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and occasionally updated everyday media; adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings.
<i>fair</i>	3	There may be an adequate grammar or sufficient amount of grammars, dictionaries, and texts, but no everyday media; audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality or degree of annotation.
<i>fragmentary</i>	2	There are some grammatical sketches, word-lists, and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality, with or without any annotation.
<i>inadequate</i>	1	Only a few grammatical sketches, short word-lists, and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable quality, or are completely un-annotated.

<i>undocumented</i>	0	No material exists.
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4.3 Language Vitality Index: Evaluating the Significance of Factors

This section describes how the above nine factors may be used. Taken together, the tables are a useful instrument for assessing the situation of a community’s language, the type of support needed for language maintenance, revitalization, perpetuation, and for documentation.

The vitality of languages varies widely depending on the different situations of speech communities. The needs for documentation also differ under varying conditions. **Languages cannot be assessed simply by adding the numbers**; we therefore suggest such simple addition *not be done*. Instead, the language vitality factors given above may be examined according to the purpose of the assessment.

Above we have explored the following factors:

- Factor 1. Intergenerational Language Transmission (scale)
- Factor 2. Absolute Number of Speakers (real numbers)
- Factor 3. Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population (scale)
- Factor 4. Trends in Existing Language Domains (scale)
- Factor 5. Response to New Domains and Media (scale)
- Factor 6. Materials for Language Education and Literacy (scale)
- Factor 7. Official Status and Use: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes And Policies (scale)
- Factor 8. Community Members’ Attitudes toward Their Own Language (scale)
- Factor 9. Amount and Quality of Documentation (scale)

The Factor descriptions given above are offered as guidelines. Each user should adapt these guidelines to the local context and to the specific purpose sought.

Example 1. Self-assessment by a speech community

A speech community may examine these factors first to assess their language situation and to determine whether action is needed, and if so, what to do next. For this purpose, although all factors are important, the first six are especially useful. The community may find that the language is mostly being spoken by grandparents and the older generation so their language could be characterized as “severely endangered” (Grade 2) with regard to Factor 1 “Intergenerational Language Transmission.” In addition, the community may find that the language is used mainly on ceremonial occasions and at community festivals. In terms of Factor 4 “Trends in Existing Language Domains,” then, the language use can be assessed at the level of “limited or formal domains” (Grade 2). On the other hand, the community may find that “most members of the community support

language maintenance” (Grade 4, Factor 8 “Community Members’ Attitudes toward Their Own Language”). At this point, the community members may conclude that their language is in extreme danger of being lost in a short period of time if nothing is done about the situation. They have also found that the community people are very much interested in reversing language shift and have expressed their support for language revitalization efforts. Once the community considers the full range of factors and completes its self-assessment, it will have a well-founded basis on which to seek support from relevant agencies.

Example 2. External evaluation

The guidelines could also be utilized as a policy tool by other bodies, of an official or voluntary nature, concerned with language maintenance, revitalization, literacy development, or documentation.

When more than one language is being considered, each of the above factors may become an important point of comparison. The result of such comparison has a wide range of possibilities for fortifying language diversity in a particular region: it may be useful in ranking the severity of language endangerment for the purpose of support; in educating the public on the importance of language diversity; in formulating a language policy for the purpose of maintaining language diversity; in mobilizing language specialists to counter the language shift; or in alerting the national and international organizations of the diminishing human intellectual resources (see Appendix 1 for an example of comparison of languages in Venezuela).

V. Concluding Remarks

The world faces new challenges in keeping its languages alive and well. It is time for the peoples of the world to pool their resources and build on the strengths of their linguistic and cultural diversity. This entails pooling the resources at all levels: individual language specialists, local speaker community, NGOs, and governmental and institutional organizations.

At the local community level and over the past several decades, for example, many people have been working to develop language education programs, usually with extremely limited technical resources. Unlike teachers of major languages of the world, they lack not only formal training in language teaching, now often required by local governments, but also language curricula and, even more crucially, usable basic language descriptions. These language teachers require a variety of skills: some are pedagogical in nature (e.g. curriculum and materials development, language teaching techniques and methods); some are sociolinguistic (e.g. analysis of ongoing language contact processes, of past and present ancestral language functions); and some are linguistic (e.g. data collection, analysis, and description).

Similarly, linguists, language activists, and policy makers have a long-term task to compile and disseminate the most effective and viable mechanisms for sustaining and revitalizing the world’s endangered languages. Most importantly, they have the

responsibility of working collaboratively with endangered language communities that enjoy an equal partnership in the projects.

We all share the responsibility of ensuring that no languages will disappear and that all languages will be maintained and perpetuated into the future generations. The reason why we must fortify the diversity of language is, indeed, captured by a Navajo elder:

**If you don't breathe,
there is no air.**

**If you don't walk,
there is no earth.**

**If you don't speak,
there is no world.**

(Paraphrased by Yamamoto from a Navajo elder's words, PBS-TV Millennium Series *Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*, hosted by David Maybury-Lewis aired on May 24, 1992)

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Appendix 1. Language Vitality Assessment: An example from Venezuela (prepared by María E. Villalón)

In this document nine factors have been proposed to assess language vitality and need for documentation. These can be applied simultaneously to several languages in order to obtain a comparative picture of their relative strength, appraise their contrasting sociolinguistic situation, and to establish priorities for action. The following example illustrates the comparative application of the factors across three indigenous languages of Venezuela, a country that recognizes and protects its minority languages. Mapoyo is a Cariban language no longer naturally spoken, but remembered by a handful of elders in a multi-ethnic community all of whose members communicate in Spanish, which is also the first language learned by all the Mapoyo children. Kari'ña is a Cariban language as well, but has many more speakers, most of whom are bilingual. Some elders learned Kari'ña as their first language and can speak it fluently, although nowadays Spanish is the preferred language of communication for most Kari'ña, numbering over 8,000. Sanima, related to Yanomamɨ, has over two thousand speakers, yet very few of them are bilingual in the dominant Spanish language.

The “number of speakers” in the table below refers to the number of fully competent speakers. In the case of Kari'ña and Sanima the figures given are but estimates, for no recent reliable statistics are available. The Mapoyo ciphers are more precise, and based on relatively recent fieldwork³. They are placed in parenthesis to indicate that they quantify “rememberers” rather than speakers. With regards to “Materials for Language Education and Literacy,” I have given Mapoyo a 1, because a practical orthography has been developed for the first time, and will be presented shortly to the community, along with audiovisual learning materials⁴. Finally, although Venezuelan Sanima is basically undocumented, unannotated recordings of varying quality exist, as well as a grammatical sketch of the closely related and better-documented Brazilian variety⁵. Thus, it may be ranked as a 1 on “Amount and Quality of Documentation.”

³ Villalón, María Eugenia & Tania Granadillo. Los marcadores de Persona de la Lengua Mapoyo. In Hein van der Voort and Simon van de Kerke (eds.), *Indigenous Languages of Lowland South America*. CNWS Publications Vol. 90, (ILLA) Vol. 1. Leiden: Leiden University, 2000, p. 197-211.

⁴ María Eugenia Villalón. *Registro y Documentación de las Lenguas Indígenas Mapoyo y Kari'ña del Estado Bolívar. Parte I: Mapoyo*. Caracas: Instituto del Patrimonio Cultural, 1999.

⁵ By Donald M. Borgman. Sanuma. In Desmond C. Derbyshire and Geoffrey K. Pullum (eds.) *Handbook of Amazonian Languages, Vol. 2*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1990, p. 16-248.

**Estimated Degree of Endangerment and Urgency for Documentation:
the case of three Venezuelan Indigenous Languages**

Factors	Languages		
	Mapoyo	Kari'ña	Saníma
Intergenerational Language Transmission	0	2	5
Absolute Number of Speakers	(7)	650	2500
Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population	1	2	5
Trends in Existing Language Domains	0	2	5
Response to New Domains and Media	0	1	---
Materials for Language Education and Literacy	1	3	0
Official Status and Use: Governmental & Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies	5	5	5
Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language	2	3	5
Amount and Quality of Documentation	1	3	1

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