Endangered Languages

Language endangerment is a serious concern to which linguists and language planners have turned their attention in the last several decades. For a variety of reasons, speakers of many smaller, less dominant languages stop using their heritage language and begin using another. Parents may begin to use only that second language with their children and gradually the intergenerational transmission of the heritage language is reduced and may even cease. As a consequence there may be no speakers who use the language as their first or primary language and eventually the language may no longer be used at all. A language may become dormant or extinct, existing perhaps only in recordings or written records and transcriptions. Languages which have not been adequately documented disappear altogether.

Defining language endangerment

Language endangerment is a matter of degree. At one end of the scale are languages that are vigorous, and perhaps are even expanding in numbers of speakers or functional areas of use, but nevertheless exist under the shadow of a more dominant language. At the other end are languages that are on the verge of extinction (that is, loss of all individuals who continue to identify the language as being related to their identity). In between are many degrees of greater or lesser vitality.

There are two dimensions to the characterization of endangerment: the number of users who identify with a particular language and the number and nature of the uses or functions for which the language is employed. A language may be endangered because there are fewer and fewer people who claim that language as their own and therefore neither use it nor pass it on to their children. It may also, or alternatively, be endangered because it is being used for fewer and fewer daily activities and so loses the characteristically close association of the language with particular social or communicative functions. Form follows function and languages which are being used for fewer and fewer domains of life also tend to lose structural complexity, which in turn may affect the perceptions of users regarding the suitability of the language for use in a broader set of functions. This can lead to a downward spiral which eventually results in the complete loss of the language.

The concern about language endangerment is centered, first and foremost, around the factors which motivate speakers to abandon their language and the social and psychological consequences of language death for the community of (former) speakers of that language. Since language is closely linked to culture, loss of language almost always is accompanied by social and cultural disruptions. More broadly, the intangible heritage of all of human society is diminished when a language disappears. Secondarily, those concerned about language endangerment recognize the implications of the loss of linguistic diversity both for the linguistic and social environment generally and for the academic community which is devoted to the study of language as a human phenomenon.
Evaluating language endangerment

The best way to identify the level of vitality of a language has not always been clear. However, a scholarly consensus that can be applied worldwide is developing, and a global evaluation of the state of language vitality is becoming increasingly possible. Sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists seek to identify trends in language use through the description of some direct measures of language vitality such as changes in the number of speakers or in the use of the language in certain domains or functions. Less directly, an increase in bilingualism, both in the number of bilinguals and in their proficiency levels, is often associated with these trends, though a high level of bilingualism is not, in itself, a sufficient condition for language shift or death. In addition there are numerous economic, political and social factors that affect a community’s self perception and motivations.

Ethnologue reports data that are indicators of the two major dimensions of language use (users and functions). When data are available, we report the following factors which may contribute to the assessment of language endangerment:

- The speaker population
- The ethnic population; the number of those who connect their ethnic identity with the language (whether or not they speak the language)
- The stability of and trends in that population size
- Residency and migration patterns of speakers
- The use of second languages
- The use of the language by others as a second language
- Language attitudes within the community
- The age range of the speakers
- The domains of use of the language
- Official recognition of languages within the nation or region
- Means of transmission (whether children are learning the language at home or being taught the language in schools)
- Non-linguistic factors such as economic opportunity or the lack thereof

Such factors interact within a society in dynamic ways that are not entirely predictable but which do follow recognizable patterns and trends. The general scholarly consensus, however, is that the key factor in gauging the relative safety of an endangered language is the degree to which intergenerational transmission of the language remains intact.

Language endangerment and the EGIDS

Because of the complexity of the interrelated factors, it is helpful to categorize the vitality of a language using a summary label. Various schemas have been proposed, each with a particular focus. For various reasons, none of these are entirely adequate for a comprehensive global assessment of the state of the world’s languages. The Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale or EGIDS (Lewis and Simons 2010) was developed specifically to fill this gap.
We report a vitality estimate for every identified language in each country where that language is spoken. This is done by reporting the estimated EGIDS level in each language entry (under the label Status); see Language Status for the definitions of the levels.

The summary of the world language situation in terms of Institutional, Developing, and Vigorous languages is described in the Language Development page. On the endangerment side of the EGIDS scale we distinguish three additional summary categories.

The first two steps down the endangerment side of the EGIDS scale are levels 6b (Threatened) and 7 (Shifting). These two levels have in common that intergenerational transmission is in the process of being broken, but the child-bearing generation can still use the language. These languages are represented by the yellow bars in the summary graphs; as a class they are referred to as “In Trouble” languages. Since parents can still use the language, it is not too late to restore natural intergenerational transmission in the home. It is possible that revitalization efforts could achieve this by focusing on the motivations of parents. We report this to be the condition of 1,531 (or 22%) of the 7,102 known living languages in the world.

The next summary category includes levels 8a through 9 which are classed as “Dying” languages. These languages are represented by the red bars in the summary graphs. At these levels, the child-bearing generation is no longer able to transmit the language to the next generation, since the only fluent users (if any remain) are above that age. Revitalization efforts would need to develop mechanisms outside the home in order to transmit the language. We report this to be the condition of 916 (or 13%) of the 7,102 known living languages in the world.

Finally, there are the “Extinct” languages at level 10. These languages are represented by black bars in the summary graphs for each country. These languages have fallen completely out of (even symbolic) use, since no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language. With extinct languages, the Ethnologue lists only those that have become extinct since 1950 (which is when the Ethnologue began publication). We report 367 such languages in the current edition. This is a rate of loss amounting to 6 languages per year.