Endangered languages and endangered language families: A global assessment

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Ethnologue

- Online: [http://www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)
- Lists 6,909 living languages + 421 that have become extinct since 1950
Overview of presentation

• Report on findings of two recent studies that have been based on the *Ethnologue* database:
  
  
1. Linguistic diversity at risk

• What proportion of the world’s linguistic diversity is at risk in the current endangerment crisis?

• Previous studies have approached this by looking at how many individual languages are at risk.

• The study with Whalen takes a deeper view of linguistic diversity by asking what proportion of language families are at risk.
  
  – The diversity that distinguishes families from each other has taken much longer to develop than that which distinguishes languages in the same family.
Methodology

- We began with the classification of the world’s languages into families as reported in *Ethnologue*.
- Then compared this with the Autotyp database (Nichols and Bickel) to identify branches that correspond to reconstructable linguistic stocks.
  - Result: 250 groupings + 122 language isolates.
- Used ISO 639-3 codes to compare the *Ethnologue* records with the corresponding records from the UNESCO *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*.
- In the absence of any indication of endangerment in either source, used language population as a proxy indicator for likely level of endangerment.
Resulting categorization

- Each stock was then assigned to a category:
  - **Extinct** — No language in the stock survives
  - **Moribund** — All remaining languages are judged by at least one of our sources as not being passed to children
  - **Most in danger** — At least one language is thought to be currently viable, but all remaining languages are below the global median of 7,500 speakers
  - **Potentially in danger** — Has languages above the median size, but none is in the top 10% with over 340,000 speakers
  - **Probably safe** — At least one language is in the largest 10% of languages
Endangerment level of linguistic stocks

- **Extinct**
- **Moribund**
- **Most in danger**
- **Potentially in danger**
- **Probably safe**

**Global**

- Extinct: 0%
- Moribund: 25%
- Most in danger: 30%
- Potentially in danger: 20%
- Probably safe: 25%

**Americas**

- Extinct: 0%
- Moribund: 30%
- Most in danger: 30%
- Potentially in danger: 20%
- Probably safe: 20%

**Pacific**

- Extinct: 0%
- Moribund: 10%
- Most in danger: 40%
- Potentially in danger: 30%
- Probably safe: 20%

**Asia**

- Extinct: 0%
- Moribund: 20%
- Most in danger: 30%
- Potentially in danger: 30%
- Probably safe: 20%

**Africa**

- Extinct: 0%
- Moribund: 15%
- Most in danger: 25%
- Potentially in danger: 30%
- Probably safe: 30%

**Europe**

- Extinct: 0%
- Moribund: 10%
- Most in danger: 40%
- Potentially in danger: 30%
- Probably safe: 20%
2. A global survey of language status

- We began with GIDS — the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale from Fishman’s (1991) seminal book on *Reversing Language Shift*
- He developed GIDS as a measuring rod for language shift:
  - Level 1 is highest: an official national language
  - Level 8 is lowest: a dying language
  - Going up the 6 levels between represent successively more functions for language in society
  - The scale measures disruption so higher numbers represent greater levels of disruption
The basic premise of GIDS

- Language shift (ending in extinction) happens as a language loses functions in society.
- To reverse language shift, the community must work to bring those functions back.
EGIDS: an Expanded GIDS

- In the next edition of *Ethnologue*, we plan to provide an estimate for all languages as to where they stand on this scale. Problems:
  - Needed to add extinct languages at bottom of scale, while keeping the *Ethnologue* distinction between dormant and extinct
  - Wanted to add international languages at the top
  - GIDS gave only two levels of endangerment; but we wanted to harmonize with UNESCO’s 4 levels
  - Wanted to add names for the levels
- This resulted in EGIDS as a 13 level scale
The 13 levels of EGIDS


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a</td>
<td>Vigorous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6b</td>
<td>Threatened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Shifting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8a</td>
<td>Moribund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8b</td>
<td>Nearly Extinct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dormant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Extinct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## EGIDS: Safe levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>LABEL</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>The language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange, and international policy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>The language is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>The language is used for local and regional mass media, education, and governmental services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Trade</td>
<td>The language is widely used in work and mass media without official status to transcend language differences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>The language is vigorous and literacy in it is being transmitted sustainably through a system of public education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>The language is vigorous and is used in written form in parts of the community but literacy is not yet sustainable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a</td>
<td>Vigorous</td>
<td>The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## EGIDS: Endangered levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>LABEL</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6b</td>
<td>Threatened</td>
<td>The language is used orally by all generations but only some parents are transmitting it to children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Shifting</td>
<td>The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves but do not normally transmit it to their children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8a</td>
<td>Moribund</td>
<td>The only remaining active speakers of the language are in the grandparent generation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8b</td>
<td>Nearly Extinct</td>
<td>The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dormant</td>
<td>The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Extinct</td>
<td>No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A global profile of language status

- We used available data to make EGIDS estimates for all languages
- Field correspondents have so far reviewed and updated 79% of them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vital</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In trouble</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead or dying</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Significance of color coding

- Green ("Vital") — It is still the norm that the language is being passed on to children in the home.
- Yellow ("In trouble") — Intergenerational transmission is in the process of being broken, but the child-bearing generation still speaks the language so successful revitalization efforts could restore transmission of the language in the home.
- Red ("Dead or dying") — It is too late to restore natural intergenerational transmission in the home.
The regions are listed from highest percentage of vital languages to lowest.

- **01 to 05** have > 80% vital languages
- **17 to 22** have < 50% vital languages
Percentage of vital languages by country
Conclusions

• Linguistic diversity lost and at risk:
  – Since 1950, 15% of stocks have become extinct
  – 27% have no member language being passed down

• At the level of individual languages:
  – 15% are dead or dying
  – 18% are clearly in trouble, but are still spoken by the child-bearing generation so could be turned around

• The level of crisis varies by region:
  – In 6 of 22 UN regions, less than 50% of lgs are vital
  – While in 5 of the regions, over 80% are vital