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## Linguistic Diversity

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According to linguists, more than 6,000 languages are spoken throughout the world, each one unique in its tones, structure and rhythm. Each language provides its speakers with unique ways of processing and transcribing thoughts and expressing feelings. Each also creates a fundamental bond that can serve to unify cultures, societies and countries. The world's linguistic diversity, or wide variety of languages, provides living evidence of humankind's immense cultural and intellectual wealth, some say. In recent years, though, many analysts have become concerned that the world's linguistic diversity is in danger.

Although the global population is growing, linguists say, the number of languages spoken throughout the world is in rapid decline. According to Michael Krauss, a linguist at the University of Alaska, "The number of languages is plummeting, imploding downward at an altogether unprecedented rate, just as the human population is shooting straight upward." By some estimates, one language disappears every two weeks, and by the end of the 21st century more than half of the world's languages will no longer be spoken.

According to many observers, the accelerating loss of languages is a direct result of forces unleashed by technological advancement and international trade. As improved communications and transportation bring citizens from different parts of the world closer together, the use of regional and "international" languages such as English is increasing dramatically. With regional languages pervading the workplace, classrooms, advertising and entertainment industries, some say, local languages are being driven into extinction. Some observers worry that, as a result, distinctions between the world's cultures are dissolving.

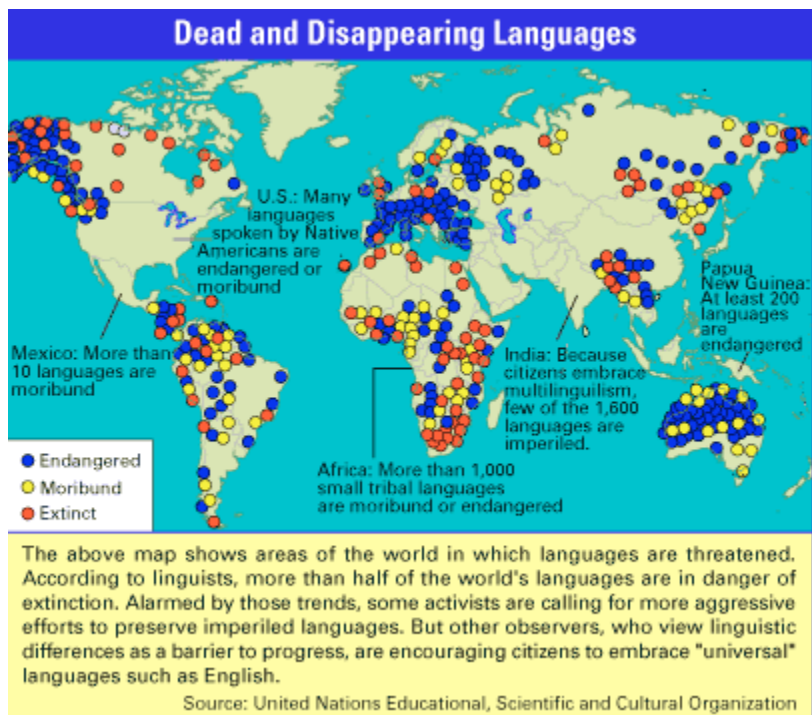
Language experts and anthropologists vocally decry language extinction. According to them, all languages contain important evidence about the way in which humans first learned to speak, as well as figures of speech that cannot be replicated in any other language. Languages also hold blueprints of the mores, traditions and religions that guide many societies, some argue.

Although most endangered languages are found in developing countries, some observers argue that languages in numerous industrial countries are also at risk. Indeed, leaders in developed countries such as France have called for measures to shield citizens from the encroachment of foreign languages. Some have enacted strict laws concerning the use of foreign words in advertising and public broadcasts; others have allocated funds for educational programs that encourage students to learn and speak endangered languages. Transnational organizations such as the United Nations (U.N.) and the European Union (E.U.) have also begun to play an active role in promoting programs that protect languages from extinction.



AP/Wide World Photos

**Two young Japanese children take part in an English class in Tokyo, Japan.**



Jeremy Eagle

But while many observers lament the disappearance of languages, others are encouraged by the global tendency toward more universal languages. For years, some observers argue, linguistic differences have impeded progress and peace between nations. By exacerbating tension and misunderstanding between cultures, critics argue, linguistic differences have divided countries from within, engendered racism and encouraged outbreaks of war. If the entire world were to embrace a single language, some observers say, peace would be more likely to prevail.

Other observers dispute the notion that technological advancement and international languages threaten linguistic diversity. Rather than reduce the number of languages that are spoken, they say, technology will help preserve many languages in decline. For example, some observers maintain that developments such as electronic mail (e-mail) will enable people to maintain frequent contact with speakers of their native languages, regardless of where they live. International trade has also encouraged many to learn foreign languages in order to market goods and services in new countries, some say. Therefore, concerns over language loss are largely unfounded, critics argue.

Is the world's linguistic diversity truly threatened? Should linguistic differences be celebrated or considered a barrier to progress? What steps, if any, should be taken to protect languages from extinction?

### A History of Language Birth and Decline

Since humans developed language some 45,000 years ago, linguists say, thousands of languages have come into being and passed away. Much like animal species, languages face the constant threat of extinction due to natural changes in the environments that support them. While languages are likely to survive when spoken by healthy, prosperous societies, they are often driven into extinction when their speakers are threatened by events such as natural disasters or armed conflict. Linguists consider a language to be extinct when the last speaker of a language dies.

Languages can also go into decline when they are brought into competition with other languages. Throughout history, languages have been displaced, transformed or eliminated altogether by military invasions, mass migration and the dissemination of religious ideas. When one language faces formidable competition from another, the geographic area in which it is spoken often shrinks, the number of speakers declines and the speaking population becomes older. Languages become endangered when they are no longer spoken by children, and moribund when they are spoken only by a minute population of elderly people.

For example, during the age of the Roman Empire, Latin, which forms the basis of many modern languages, spread throughout much of Europe. As Roman forces seized territory throughout Europe, Latin became a "prestige language," or one that was associated with power, wealth and sophistication. Many people under the Roman Empire gave up their native languages with hope of gaining wealth and access to positions of authority.

Likewise, the spread of Islam, which originated in present-day Saudi Arabia during the seventh century, encouraged many populations in North Africa to adopt Arabic, the language in which Islamic religious texts were written. As a result, many African

languages became endangered or moribund.

According to historians, major threats to the world's linguistic diversity first began to materialize during the 16th and 17th centuries, when European kingdoms such as France and England began to explore and gain control over distant continents. As colonization proceeded in Asia, Africa and the Americas, many languages that had flourished in isolation were wiped out when indigenous populations were killed off by violent clashes with European explorers and the diseases that they spread.

During the 19th century, many languages were also pushed into decline as leaders attempted to form so-called nation-states by eliminating regional linguistic differences and adopting national languages. For example, under the rule of leaders such as Napoleon Bonaparte, who ruled France during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, French regional languages such as Breton, Alsatian, Basque and Occitan were suppressed. Citizens who spoke those languages were punished or marginalized.



Jeremy Eagle

Languages have also faced challenges from leaders who have considered linguistic differences to be barriers to economic progress and the organization of large countries. For example, in the U.S., under the direction of President Ulysses S. Grant (in office from 1869 to 1877), a federal commission on Indian affairs made a concerted effort to eliminate linguistic differences by ending the use of Native American languages. During that period, native languages were seen as barriers to the expansion and administration of territories occupied by English-speaking settlers in the Western U.S.

During the 20th century, many leaders throughout the world also attempted to eliminate linguistic differences in the pursuit of political ideals such as communism, which called for equal rights and social standing among all citizens. The attainment of those ideals, many leaders argued, would be possible only if a common language were adopted. Therefore, communist governments in countries such as the former Soviet Union sought to encourage their citizens to speak Russian instead of local languages. Under Soviet "Russification" programs, children in various regions of the country were sent to nine-month boarding school programs, called Internat, where they were taught Russian grammar and encouraged to abandon their native languages.

In present day, languages continue to perish. For example, linguists note that in Africa, many local languages are at risk of being lost as populations are beset by civil wars, famine and outbreaks of disease. According to many observers, languages also face additional threats created by global trade and technological development. However, the degree to which those forces are affecting the world's linguistic diversity is a subject of intense debate.

### Current Threats to Diversity Cited

According to many analysts, much of the world's linguistic diversity is contained in isolated and underdeveloped areas, where languages are insulated from the influences of the media and government policies. Such areas are often found in developing countries that are beset by problems such as poverty and joblessness. In many countries, languages are placed at risk because people are leaving such enclaves in favor of urban centers, where jobs and educational opportunities are more plentiful. Those people are likely to adopt the regional languages spoken in city centers, some observers say.

Local languages are also threatened by development that is encroaching upon once-isolated areas. For example, in Russia, geologists have discovered large natural gas beds in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region, located on the coast of the Kara Sea in the Arctic Circle. The region is home to a tribe known as the Nentsi, a small population of reindeer herders that has a distinct language and culture. As private energy companies gravitate to the region, many of the Nentsi have been persuaded to abandon their native language in favor of Russian, which is needed to obtain jobs.

According to Valentina Nyarui, a teacher from the region, the Nentsi language is quickly disappearing along with age-old cultural traditions. "The Nentsi in towns are losing their language," says Nyarui, a teacher who is leading programs to maintain the Nentsi language. "They live in Russian homes. They don't wear their traditional clothes. They don't tell their traditional stories."

According to linguists, trends such as migration and industrial development also put languages at risk by discouraging parents from passing local languages on to their children. Because local languages are often associated with poverty and backwardness, many parents teach their children in regional languages, which are more likely to help them succeed. Consequently, many languages persist only among elderly populations, diminishing as their speakers die off.

According to H. Russell Bernard, an anthropologist at the University of Florida in Gainesville, such is the case in many Alaskan communities, where Native American languages are endangered. "The key variable is not the number of speakers but whether the language is being passed on to the next generation," Bernard says. "Without that, the languages are not just moribund, they are doomed."

The accelerating loss of languages has also been attributed to the increasing prevalence of English throughout the world. As the economic strength of the U.S. grows, English continues to reach further into the distant corners of the world through media such as television, film and the Internet. While some observers happily consider English to be the world's *lingua franca*, or common language, others have dubbed it a "killer language"--one that is killing off thousands of local dialects and polluting the vocabularies of other languages. Indeed, by some estimates, 1.6 billion people, or roughly one-third of the world's population, uses English every day, even though English is the native language of only 380 million people.

In many regions of the world where the English language has not historically had any significant influence, many people have nevertheless adopted it as the primary language of business and politics. For example, English is the official language of the European Central Bank, the bank of the new European Monetary Union (EMU), even though the bank is in Frankfurt, Germany, and neither Britain nor any other English-speaking country is a member. English is also the working language of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional trade organization. Some observers fear that English is becoming the world's prestige language, and that other languages will soon be looked upon as less important.

Some observers also contend that the waning of linguistic diversity is reflected in the pervasiveness of English on the Internet. By some estimates, 80% of Internet sites are posted in English. Many analysts also say that, although the number of Internet sites posted by citizens of non-English speaking countries is growing, the amount of non-English content on the Web is not increasing accordingly.

Many observers are also alarmed by the absence of linguistic diversity in the fields of scientific and academic research. Analysts say that English has become the *lingua franca* of professors, doctors and scientists, and that many are being discouraged from publishing reports and papers in their native languages. Indeed, according to Eugene Garfield, founder of the *Science Citation Index*, a journal that releases information on science publications, in 1997 some 95% of the 925,000 scientific articles published in periodicals were written in English. Only half of those articles originated in English-speaking countries.

English is also becoming increasingly prevalent in the classrooms of universities worldwide. In countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands, for example, many college courses are now taught in English. Analysts say that many professors feel an obligation to help their students gain the English language skills that are necessary in the global marketplace. Furthermore, observers say that English textbooks in some subjects are now more readily available than books written in other languages.

According to some observers, the popularity of English in academic and scientific settings poses a threat to the evolution and preservation of many languages. They say that a large number of languages are not being updated with the new vocabulary words needed in discussing technological developments and new discoveries. Consequently, observers say, English may soon become the only language that is useful for all levels of discourse.

Larry Kimura, a University of Hawaii linguist, argues that many languages are becoming endangered because they are not updated enough to be conveniently employed in modern situations. Kimura, who has led efforts to revive the Hawaiian language, says that many people have been dissuaded from speaking Hawaiian because its vocabulary is outdated. "A living language means you have to be able to talk about everything," says Kimura. "If you can't talk about everything, you will talk in English. It's simple."

### Protection of Languages Advocated

Throughout the world, citizens concerned by the disappearance of languages are calling for aggressive measures to protect linguistic diversity. Kenneth Hale, a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says that governments and transnational organizations have an ethical obligation to play a more active role in the effort to preserve languages in decline.

According to Hale, one cannot fully understand a culture, or know the history of a civilization, without speaking its language. "When you lose a language, it's like dropping a bomb on a museum," Hale says.

According to some advocates, protecting linguistic diversity is not only important for cultural reasons, but is also imperative to the pursuit of research into the workings of the human brain. By studying different languages, scientists can gain new information on how the brain processes thoughts and experiences, as well as insight into how the brain organizes the physical activity of speech. Loss of languages thus hinders such studies, advocates say.

Some linguists also argue that many endangered languages may also hold undiscovered information that could be beneficial to scientists, ecologists and doctors. For example, analysts note that many indigenous languages spoken by the aboriginal tribes of Australia contain the names of plants that have yet to be classified or studied by botanists. Some experts also say that the languages of the indigenous populations of the Amazon rain forest may contain the names of plants that could be used to cure diseases. "With the wholesale reduction of lingual and cultural diversity, we will lose ideas that can help us adapt to new ways of living, including curing illness," Bernard says.

In an effort to protect national languages from encroachment, some governments have implemented strict linguistic laws and programs. For example, the French government requires that French broadcasts on French radio stations must contain at least 40% French music.

In Poland, parliamentary legislation has been introduced that would ban the use of foreign languages in advertising and entertainment unless Polish translations are also given. "We simply want to keep the language free from pollution and to send out a signal to people that their culture is being protected despite the increasing influences from outside," says Iwona Sledzinska-Katarasinska, a member of the Freedom Union Party who introduced the legislation. In Brazil, similar laws have recently been proposed to encourage citizens to use Portuguese, which is the common language of citizens in that country.

Transnational governmental organizations have also begun to take part in the fight to save dying languages. The E.U., for example, spends more than \$3 million per year to protect minority languages. Likewise, the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Committee (UNESCO) administers programs intended to protect endangered languages. Among other projects, UNESCO helped create a Tokyo-based research center that houses recordings and databases of endangered languages.

Some citizens, however, argue that current efforts to preserve dying languages are insufficient. Jane Hill, an anthropologist and linguist at the University of Arizona, says that threats to the world's linguistic diversity deserve as much attention as is given to the environmental threat of animal and plant species depletion. Hill has criticized the University of Arizona and other public institutions in the U.S. for paying more attention to the plight of endangered animals than to the human crisis of language extinction. "We spend more on endangered species than endangered languages," Hill says. "The University of Arizona spends \$60,000 to protect the Mt. Graham red squirrel [an endangered species threatened by construction of an international observatory] and very little on languages."

### Critics Downplay Threat to Diversity

While some observers proclaim a crisis of language extinction, others are more optimistic about the future of the world's linguistic diversity. According to many analysts, the extent to which technological development and international trade are threatening languages has been largely exaggerated. In fact, some say, many so-called endangered languages are being nurtured by the very forces that have been blamed for language extinction. Rather than wiping out the world's linguistic differences, critics say, technology and international trade will actually help preserve many of the world's endangered languages.

For example, although many languages were once endangered when large numbers of their speakers migrated from their native regions, today, analysts say, improved communications technology has tempered the threat posed by migration. Even as speakers of endangered languages disperse to different corners of the world, they can maintain contact with their native languages. Satellite television, for example, now allows many people to watch programs in their native language, regardless of where they live.

Many observers also dispute the notion that the widespread use of English threatens less prevalent languages. Although it appears that English will soon blot out other languages, many analysts contend that the current prominence of English is temporary. Other languages such as Greek, Latin and French were used as common languages for centuries, only to fall into decline. The English language is currently the world's *lingua franca* only because it is the primary language of the U.S., which at present is the world's most powerful military and economic power, some say. Eventually, they contend, the U.S. may lose some of its power to other nations. As a result, the use of English will diminish.

Many analysts say that the use of English may also begin to wane as the world's population of English speakers is eclipsed by other language groups. Some studies indicate that the world's share of English speakers is already shrinking rapidly. Each year, the birth rates of non-English speakers easily exceed those of English speakers. Indeed, the proportion of native English speakers in the world will shrink over the next century to less than 5% from more than 8%, according to a 1999 study by David Graddol, a linguist who works with The English Company Ltd., a Milton Keynes, England-based firm that tracks the spread of the English language.

"The main message is that the globalization of English isn't going to happen the way people expect it to," Graddol says. Although citizens throughout the world may continue to use English for occupational purposes, many linguists contend that the proportion of native English speakers will probably not grow, and that other languages will continue to be spoken in the home.

Some observers also disagree with the idea that the growing use of international languages will harm the world's cultural diversity. Critics say that international languages such as English are not annihilators of cultural traditions, but rather a practical means of communication. "English is like a driver's license or computer skills," says Euh Yoon Dae, former president of the Korean Center for International Finance, a private research group based in Seoul, South Korea. "It's an indispensable tool in international trade. It should not be viewed as a threat to our cultural heritage."

Some also question the claim that increasing use of the Internet will encourage citizens to speak English and forsake their native languages. Although a great majority of Internet sites currently originate in the U.S., in the near future, foreign-based sites are expected to proliferate. According to an August 2000 report by International Data Corp., a Framingham, Mass.-based research firm, there will be 602 million Internet users worldwide within three years. The percentage of American users will drop to one-third in 2003, from one-half in 1998, the report says. Since the fastest-growing Internet user group is found in Asia, many analysts say that more non-English sites will be launched to accommodate Internet users from that region.

Growing fears of globalization may also inspire citizens to make efforts to protect endangered languages, some say. Throughout Europe, for example, many citizens have begun to take greater interest in learning and revitalizing local languages. According to Bernard Poignant, the mayor of Quimper, a small town in the French province of Brittany, the growing movement to protect endangered languages is a natural reaction to the technological and economic changes that seem to be creating a uniform, international culture. "The more everything goes global, the more people will hang on to what is local," says Poignant. "It's an animal reflex, to seek out what is closest to you and most stable."

Other observers argue that the loss of some languages is natural, and contest the notion that the adoption of common, regional languages is a negative development. Having a common language would facilitate better communication between countries and save the high costs of translating documents into multiple languages, some say. Furthermore, even as fears of diminishing linguistic diversity continue to grow, many leaders are calling for policies that would effectively limit linguistic diversity within the borders of the countries that they govern. In the U.S., for example, English-only laws have been enacted in 25 states, and many more have been proposed.

### Debate Over Language Likely to Continue

Throughout history, languages have faced threats to their survival. But in recent years, it has become clear that technology, global trade and other forces have intensified competition between languages--perhaps killing off many at an unprecedented rate. The rate of language decline has sparked intense debate. While some say that differences in language should be celebrated and protected, others argue that they are destabilizing factors, and that their disappearance would in fact be positive.

According to some political scientists, the world's current preoccupation with language says much about the way in which nations compete for power in today's world. Whereas nations once waged war mostly over disputed territory, today they are more likely to fight battles--both armed and unarmed--over economic and cultural influence. Many political scientists have termed this struggle for influence the "clash of civilizations." But according to Francis Beer, a professor of political science, it could also be called a "clash of languages," since the nations of the world often attempt to assert their power by maintaining or increasing the use of their languages. "The politics of language," Beer says, "are being played out everywhere."

As languages are increasingly viewed as symbols of power, struggles over their use are likely to continue. The polarizing effect of language is evident in states such as the former Yugoslavia, where citizens remain divided over the Serbian province of Kosovo. In 1997, the majority Albanian--speaking population of Kosovo led an armed uprising to gain independence--partly for the sake of maintaining the right to use Albanian in public schools and institutions. That conflict, like many other such conflicts throughout the world, has yet to be resolved. And it remains to be seen whether such struggles will inspire the citizens of the world to embrace or reject linguistic diversity.

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### Contact Information

*Information on how to contact organizations that are either mentioned in the discussion of linguistic diversity or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:*

#### **Endangered Language Fund, Inc.**

Department of Linguistics  
Yale University  
P.O. Box 208236  
New Haven, Conn. 06520-8236  
Telephone: (203) 432-2450  
Internet: [sapir.ling.yale.edu/elf](http://sapir.ling.yale.edu/elf)

#### **Terralingua**

P.O. Box 122  
Hancock, Mich. 49930-0122  
Internet: [www.terralingua.org](http://www.terralingua.org)

#### **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**

2 United Nations Plaza  
New York, NY 10017  
Telephone: (212) 963-5995  
Internet: [www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)

### Keywords and Points

*For further information about the ongoing debate over linguistic diversity, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:*

Endangered languages  
David Graddol  
Language extinction  
Indigenous languages  
Native American Languages Act

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