Language Vitality and Endangerment
UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on
Endangered Languages
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Table of Contents

Language Vitality and Endangerment ---------------------------------------------- 1
I. Preamble ---------------------------------------------------------------------- 2
II. Background ------------------------------------------------------------------- 3
III. Supporting Endangered Languages ------------------------------------------- 4
3.1 The Role of the Speech Community ---------------------------------------- 4
3.2 External Specialists and Speech Communities --------------------------- 4
3.3 What Can Be Done? ------------------------------------------------------- 5
3.4 Linguistic Diversity and Ecodiversity ------------------------------------- 6
3.5 Salvage Documentation ----------------------------------------------------- 6
IV. Assessing Language Endangerment and Urgency for Documentation----------- 7
4.1 A Caveat -------------------------------------------------------------------- 7
4.2 Language Vitality Assessment --------------------------------------------- 7
4.2.1 Major Evaluative Factors of Language Vitality ------------------------ 7
Factor 1. Intergenerational Language Transmission ------------------------ 7
Factor 2. Absolute Number of Speakers ------------------------------------- 8
Factor 3. Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population ------------- 9
Factor 4. Trends in Existing Language Domains ----------------------------- 9
Factor 5. Response to New Domains and Media ----------------------------- 11
Factor 6. Materials for Language Education and Literacy --------------------- 12
4.2.2 Language Attitudes and Policies --------------------------------------- 12
4.2.2.1 Language Attitudes and Policies: Dominant and
Non-dominant Language Communities ---------------------------------- 13
Factor 7.: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes And Policies
Including Official Status and Use -------------------------------------- 13
Factor 8. Community Members’ Attitudes toward their
Own Language ---------------------------------------------------------- 14
4.2.2.2 Language Attitudes and Policies: Interaction and
Social Effects -------------------------------------------------- 15
4.2.3 Urgency for Documentation --------------------------------------------- 16
Factor 9. Amount and Quality of Documentation ---------------------------- 16
4.3 Language Vitality Index: Evaluating the Significance of Factors ------ 17
Example 1. Self-assessment by a speech community ---------------- 17
Example 2. External evaluation ----------------------------------------- 18
V. Concluding Remarks -------------------------------------------------------- 18
References ------------------------------------------------------------------- 20
Appendix 1. Language Vitality Assessment: An example from Venezuela
(prepared by María E. Villalón) ----------------------------------------- 22
Appendix 2. Acknowledgments -------------------------------------------------- 24
Appendix 3. UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group Members ----------------------------- 25
UNESCO Document ii Language Vitality & Endangerment
Language Vitality and Endangerment

UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Section’s Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages

Language diversity is essential to the human heritage. Each and every language 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 (see Appendix 3 for the list of members who contributed to this paper). 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.

UNESCO Document 1 Language Vitality & Endangerment

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.

UNESCO Document 2 Language Vitality & Endangerment

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” (Noriko Aikawa, 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

UNESCO Document 3 Language Vitality & Endangerment 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;

UNESCO Document 4 Language Vitality & Endangerment 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
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

UNESCO Document 5 Language Vitality & Endangerment 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 eco-regions 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 described 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.

UNESCO Document 6 Language Vitality & Endangerment

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.

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