UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger

The new journal Amanar, in Tifinagh, is distributed in Agadez, Niger ©Jacques Roure

UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* is intended to raise awareness about language endangerment and the need to safeguard the world’s linguistic diversity among policy-makers, speaker communities and the general public, and to be a tool to monitor the status of endangered languages and the trends in linguistic diversity at the global level.

The latest edition of the Atlas (2009), made possible thanks to the support of the Government of Norway, lists about 2,500 languages (among which 230 languages extinct since 1950), approaching the generally-accepted estimate of some 3,000 endangered languages worldwide. For each language, the Atlas provides its name, degree of endangerment (see below) and the country or countries where it is spoken.

The [online edition](#) provides additional information on numbers of speakers, relevant policies and projects, sources, ISO codes and geographic coordinates. This free Internet-based version of the Atlas for the first time permits wide accessibility and allows for interactivity and timely updating of information, based on feedback provided by users.

**Degrees of endangerment**

The present edition designates the degrees of endangerment a little differently than the previous editions. The new terminology is based on UNESCO’s [Language Vitality and Endangerment](#).
framework that establishes six degrees of vitality/endangerment based on nine factors. Of these factors, the most salient is that of intergenerational transmission.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of endangerment</th>
<th>Intergenerational Language Transmission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>safe</td>
<td>language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unsafe</td>
<td>most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>definitely endangered</td>
<td>children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>severely endangered</td>
<td>language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critically endangered</td>
<td>the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extinct</td>
<td>there are no speakers left</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger

Download...
- the [UNESCO Map of the World’s Languages in Danger](#) (PDF format - 20 Mo)
- [Statistics by country or area](#)

The online edition of the Atlas includes all of the information in the print edition (soon to be released) and much more. Using this interface, you can browse through the endangered languages listed in the 2009 edition of UNESCO’s Atlas, using combinations of search criteria and/or zooming in the map below (see. [browsing functionalities](#)). For more detailed information, please consult the [Language names and locations](#), [Contribute your comments](#) and [FAQ](#) pages.

### Previous Editions of the Atlas (1996, 2001)

out of print
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The first edition of the Atlas was edited by Stephen Wurm and published in 1996. It comprised 53 pages including 12 pages of maps, appearing in three linguistic versions (English, French and Spanish). The first publication of its kind, the Atlas met with vivid scholarly and journalistic interest and soon became a valuable reference book for the general public.
A second updated English edition of the Atlas appeared in 2001, again edited by Stephen Wurm, and expanded to 90 pages including 14 pages of maps showing 800 languages. The update reflected the fact that since 1996 research on endangered languages and interest in the field had proliferated. This edition again attracted much academic, media and public attention.

In 2005, an online clickable map of the African continent, comprising entries on the 100 endangered African languages mentioned in the 2001 edition of the Atlas, was developed by UNESCO, as a test phase for the full-fledged digital version finalized in 2009.

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Editors and contributors for the 2009 edition

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A large and geographically diverse group of regional editors and contributors, some of whom had already been involved in the previous two editions, worked with Christopher Moseley to provide and validate languages data and write essays. These experts are:

- North Africa and Arab States: Salem Mezhoud, Yamina El Kirat, Bonnie Stalls
- Sub-Saharan Africa: Matthias Brenzinger, Herman Batibo
- Europe and the Caucasus: Tapani Salminen, Tjeerd de Graaf
- Siberia and North-East Asia: Juha Janhunen
- South-East Asia: David Bradley, Suwilai Premsrirat, Gérard Diffloth
- Pacific, Indonesia and Papua-New-Guinea: Darrell Tryon
- Australia: Michael Walsh
- North America: Lyle Campbell (with Naomi Fox and Chris Rogers), Mary Jane Norris
- Mexico and Central America: Yolanda Lastra
- Lowland South America: Marleen Haboud, Bruna Franchetto, Denny Moore
- Highland South America and Caribbean: Willem Adelaar, Gustavo Solis Fonseca
- West and Central Asia: Akim Elnazarov
- India and Himalayan Chain: Stuart Blackburn, Jean Robert Opgenort, Udaya Narayan Singh

Some specialists also accepted to provide complementary information on specific areas, including Alexandre François (North Vanuatu), Sun Hongkai (China), Bruno Poizat (Aramaic), Tulio Rojas (Colombia), Jean Sibille (Aramaic) and Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle (Southern Arabic Peninsula).

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Language mapping in the Atlas

There is no perfect way to reflect the complexities of languages and their communities on a map. The print edition of the Atlas seeks to provide global coverage, dividing the world somewhat arbitrarily into regions; those with the greatest linguistic diversity are presented at smaller scale than those with less diversity. For the online edition, users determine the zoom level themselves, allowing a panoramic view or a very detailed one. No attempt is made to show population density or the area in which a language is spoken; we have instead selected a central point for each language. For more discussion of methodological issues and options see the [2007 Cartography meeting](#).

Language names

The language names used in the Atlas are those considered most appropriate by respective regional editors. Names have been indicated in English transcriptions, and their translation into French and Spanish is under progress. Alternative names (spelling variants, dialects or names in non-Roman scripts) are also provided in many cases. A particular effort was made to avoid names considered pejorative by the speakers of languages.
In cases where distinct names are used by different speaker communities for the same language, the editor had to choose only one, leaving the other name in the alternate name field (e.g. languages at the border of Brazil).

**Language locations**

By default, languages are mapped using a single point at the relative centre of the area where the speakers live, or in certain cases, such as Canada, where the largest speaker community lives.

In the case of outlying communities, the editors had the possibility to create separate entries, indicating respective levels of endangerment and numbers of speakers. In such cases, a geographical attribute is provided in parentheses after the language name to differentiate the entries. This approach was used in the case of resettlement and migration (e.g. Judeo Berber, extinct in Morocco, severely endangered in Israel), clearly identified settlements (e.g. American Indian, as Powatomi) and greatly separated communities (e.g. Kurux or Karaim).

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**Send your comments to improve the data presented in the Atlas**

Each language entry in the online Atlas contains a tab for comments designed to collect feedback from speakers of endangered languages and experts who study these languages, thus contributing to the improvement of the Atlas. We invite your comments on any of the elements presented there (names, vitality, location - coordinates, countries or areas, number of speakers and ISO 639-3 codes).
with, when possible, bibliographic or online sources. All comments will be considered and processed, but it may take some time.

We also invite you to provide more detailed information on your language or a language you have studied using the Linguistic vitality and diversity questionnaire (English | Spanish) based on the methodological framework proposed by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Group on Endangered Languages. This will contribute to the precision of the data provided in the Atlas, as well as to elaborating the indicator on "linguistic diversity and vitality" (cf. 2010 biodiversity target).

We also welcome information on safeguarding projects under way for languages in this Atlas, as well as complementary resources on these languages (online dictionaries, websites, references to media in these languages, etc.).

For remarks on specific languages, please use the in-built forms of the Interactive Atlas. For more general comments, please email atlas@unesco.org.

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A methodology for assessing language vitality and endangerment

- Meetings
  - 10/12-03-2003, Paris: Expert meeting on Safeguarding Endangered Languages

In 2002 and 2003, UNESCO asked an international group of linguists to develop a framework for determining the vitality of a language in order to assist in policy development, identification of needs and appropriate safeguarding measures. This Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages elaborated a landmark concept paper entitled “Language Vitality and Endangerment”, which established the following nine criteria:
No single factor is sufficient to assess the state of a community’s language. However, taken together, these nine factors can determine the viability of a language, its function in society and the type of measures required for its maintenance or revitalization. Full document is available here (English | French).

Example of implementation of this methodology
The National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005, prepared by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies at the request of the Australian Government, provides an analysis of the situation of Australian indigenous languages based on UNESCO’s nine Language Vitality factors. Among its most significant findings, the report determined that only 145 of Australia’s more than 250 known indigenous languages continue actually to be spoken. In addition, approximately 110 of them have been classified as severely or critically endangered. Only 18 indigenous languages are described as “strong” according to such a crucial factor as intergenerational transmission.

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Linguistic diversity in relation to biodiversity

The reversal of the current trend of biodiversity loss and degradation will only be possible if it is tackled in an integrated, interdisciplinary manner that combines different fields, ... namely education, science, culture and communication
Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO

Background
In 2002 the States Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) committed to achieve a significant reduction of the current rate of biodiversity loss at the global, regional and national level as a contribution to poverty alleviation and to the benefit of all life on earth by 2010 (the 2010 Biodiversity Target).

Subsequently, 22 Headline Indicators to measure progress towards this target were adopted. The indicators cover the seven Focal Areas, including the one on the Status of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices. As part of this effort, UNESCO's Intangible Heritage Section is developing the Indicator on the Status and Trends of Linguistic Diversity and Numbers of Speakers of Indigenous Languages.

Methodology

The preservation of traditional knowledge related to biodiversity may depend to a large degree on the safeguarding of the languages that are vehicles of that knowledge. It thus becomes crucial to find ways to record linguistic diversity and vitality and to track their change over time.

UNESCO has used two parallel methodological approaches for data collection:

1. Desk study on the numbers of speakers of indigenous languages using national censuses, published sources, and data provided by linguistic institutions and individual experts. All data collected through this desk study have been integrated into an electronic database that contains over 1500 entries as of February 2009;
2. Development of a standardized data collection tool in the form of a questionnaire titled Linguistic Vitality and Diversity. The questionnaire has been sent to hundreds of linguists specializing in indigenous languages, and as of February 2009 over eighty have been returned with detailed information on endangered languages covering a wide range of countries.

If you have done research on an indigenous language, please fill in the questionnaire (English | Spanish) and send it back to us at the following e-mail address: ling.diversity@unesco.org.

The next step will be to do a statistical analysis of the collected data in order to identify statistically significant factors. A Technical Expert Meeting will be held in April 2009 in Paris, in order to
discuss the findings. Based upon feedback from linguists and statisticians, the data collection tool will be adjusted and an indicator methodology proposed.

An international expert meeting will later be organized in order to raise awareness among relevant parties of the impact of language disappearance on the maintenance or loss of traditional environmental knowledge and biodiversity. The meeting will also seek to build national capacities for measuring linguistic vitality and diversity using the indicator.

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Register of Good Practices of Language Preservation

- **Successes big and small**
- **Submission to the Register**
- **What can YOU get out of it?**
- **Registered good practices**

The purpose of the Register of Good Practices in Language Preservation, a project of UNESCO's Endangered Languages Programme, is to identify, document and disseminate past and current practices that have proven to be successful in safeguarding languages and language communities. Our goal is to collect a diverse body of experiences in order to provide a rich source of creative and innovative approaches to problem-solving, proven solutions, practical information, lessons learned, helpful hints, do's and don't's and adaptable models, to those engaged in sustainable language preservation.

**Successes big and small**

Language preservation is a difficult task. External forces including military, economic, religious, cultural or educational subjugation, but also internal factors such as attitude changes – all these continue to put linguistic diversity under pressure, and create obstacles to its preservation.

This is why UNESCO's Endangered Languages Programme recognizes that successes, whether small or big, can be of great value in the endeavour to safeguard the world's endangered languages. Whether it is the strengthening of language competence in an individual, or the installation of a comprehensive elementary school programme, the fostering of a speech community's feeling of pride or building teaching capacities - good case studies are worth sharing with others, and shall be reflected in our database, to draw lessons from the past and provide encouragement for the future.

**Submission to the Register**

We invite reports on any form of community-based projects concerning language preservation - e.g. reports on local/ regional projects in education, revitalization, standardization, community development, awareness raising, capacity building, documentation, use of new technologies, etc.
Find the Submission Form at the end of this page (project document)
Please support the project by forwarding the link to this website to other interested parties.

What can YOU get out of it?

The Register of Good Practices of Language Preservation was conceived as a source of experience-based knowledge for people engaging in projects to protect endangered languages and as a tool to enhance the visibility and recognition of revitalization efforts throughout the world.

As SUBMITTER

As a submitter to the Register, you can ensure that your project will be visible and accessible to a broad audience via its recognition and publication on UNESCO’s web portal, which records over 10 million hits every month on average. Increased visibility and public recognition are powerful tools for both networking and fundraising efforts of community-based and/ or academic projects. By sharing their practical knowledge and passing on their experiences, submitters make a vital contribution to the promotion of language preservation efforts world-wide, and thus to stemming the tide of language eradication.

As USER

As a user of the Register, you will be able to gain a broader understanding of the contexts and realities of language preservation, tapping into the accumulated tried-and-tested knowledge and models of adaptable practice-based solutions.

Registered good practices

Africa Asia and the Pacific Europe and North America Latin America and the Caribbean

Basic Standardization of All Unwritten African Languages (BASAL)
2004/2006 Cameroon Details...

The language development and documentation project ‘Basic Standardization of All Unwritten African Languages’ (BASAL) applies a methodology for developing a writing system for languages that have only oral forms, and in this way support and facilitate wider use of such languages in their communities. The essential steps involved in this are: documentation, alphabetization, preparation of language materials, literacy classes and training of local language workers.

The nine minority languages of Cameroon that have been covered so far by the project are Gbete (spoken in the Eastern Province), Bembele (spoken in the Eastern and Centre Provinces), Mada (spoken in the Far North Province), Bangolan (spoken in the North-Western Province), Bikele (spoken in the Eastern Province), Kwasio (spoken in the Southern Province), Tuki (spoken in the Centre Province), Bamali and Mfumte (both spoken in the North-Western Province).
BASAL was developed by the National Association for Cameroonian Language Committees (NACALCO) Centre for Applied Linguistics based in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Under this project, young volunteer linguists carry out documentation of languages in cooperation with members of speaker communities, who are subsequently trained as language workers and trainers in literacy. A set of basic materials (alphabet, orthography guide, teaching manuals, word lists, etc.) is developed to allow the communities to use their mother tongues in media, in local schools and adult literacy centres, and in everyday and public life.

- **Full report:** English
- Project contact and author of the report:
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  - PO Box 2905 - Yaoundé - Cameroon