

BIGMUN 2017
General Assembly 3 – Social, Cultural and Humanitarian (SOCHUM)

Research Report

Topic 3: The question of preservation of languages at risk of extinction by 2050



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Introduction:

One of the topics we will be discussing in the third committee of the General Assembly is the question of preserving languages at risk of extinction by 2050. There are more than 6000 languages spoken on our earth and about 97% of the world's population speak only about 4% of the world's languages; equally 96% of the world languages are spoken by just 3% of the world's population. That means a very small number of people are entrusted with preserving most of our world's language diversity. Over 50% of the spoken languages today are losing speakers¹. Languages are an important part of every culture and contain important part of their heritage, local knowledge, and language evolution. Therefore it is incredibly important to preserve endangered languages around the world today.

Definition of Key Terms:

Endangered language- A language is endangered when the speakers of the language no longer use it, stop passing it on to further generations, and when it no longer used in different arenas of daily life such as public institutions, media, home, school, or work. UNESCO classifies endangered languages into four categories:

- *Vulnerable:* Most children speak the language, but it might only be used in certain settings.
- *Definitely endangered:* Children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue.
- *Severely endangered:* Only spoken by older generations, parent generations may understand it but do not speak it to children or with each other.
- *Critically endangered:* Only speakers are grandparents or older generations, and they only speak it partially or use it rarely.²

Extinct language- A language is extinct when it no longer is taught to children as a mother tongue and the last speaker of that language, who learned it as a mother tongue, has died within the last five decades³. Although a language might be extinct it is possible to bring it back to life with a strong effort within the communities and good documentation of the language.

Dialect- The less spoken language in a region; it can often have the same roots as the dominant language of that region.

¹UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (12/10/2003). Visited 3/1/2018. Available at: http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/Language_vitality_and_endangerment_EN.pdf

² UNESCO (2011). Visited: 29/12/2018. Available: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001924/192416e.pdf>

³ UNESCO (2017). Visited: 3/1/2018. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/>

Dominant language- Is the language spoken more in a certain area. This language is often socially, politically, and economically dominant. It is the language used most often in the media, schools, and the government.

Background Information:

The world today has more than 6000 languages, but UNESCO predicts that by the end of the 21st century 90% of the languages will be replaced by dominant languages. In the past century alone, approximately 400 languages have become extinct. There are endangered languages all over the world. An estimated 100 languages only have a few speakers left⁴.

Language is a central element of every culture. Each language conveys insights into a particular population. Language is not just a means of communication. Every language depicts a society's understanding of the world and can be used to understand and shape its future. When we lose a language, we lose evidence for understanding patterns in the configuration of human languages, their history, and their relationship with the exclusive and complex ecosystem of their home. Many languages, even non-written ones, have very distinct language structures and very different grammatical systems; much more complex than English. A people's heritage is also carried in their language. Only one third of languages are written⁵. Many languages preserved their legacy, history and knowledge through storytelling, songs, and poems. If these languages die they bury with them the culture's songs, stories, and heritage. Each language reveals different things about a culture and how they interpret human emotions and behaviour. Cherokee does not have a word for "goodbye" only a word for "I will see you again". They also have no word or phrase for "I'm sorry" but they have a word for the experience of when you see an adorable baby or kitten⁴. Without these languages, an essential element of their culture will be lost. A language contains a lot of knowledge about, but not limited to, geography, mathematics, biology, pharmacology, navigation, and astronomy. This ancient knowledge is often lost when a language dies.

Language endangerment is often caused by external or internal forces. External forces such as but not limited to cultural, military, economic, religious, or educational subjection. Internal forces against a language also play a sizeable role in language loss. Internal forces often come from the specific communities' attitude towards its own language, but internal forces frequently have roots in external forces. Some indigenous people have come to associate their poor social position with their cultural traditions and language. This might cause negativity towards their language discouraging

⁴UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (12/10/2003). Visited 3/1/2018. Available at:http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/Language_vitality_and_endangerment_EN.pdf

⁵Nuwer, R. (6/6/2014). Visited: 4/1/2018. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20140606-why-we-must-save-dying-languages>

intergenerational transmission of the language. A community might also favour a dominant language over their own to: allow for mobility, avoiding discrimination, ensure career opportunities, or to become more globalised⁴. Many native American languages in the USA have gone extinct over the past centuries, often community views may be negative about the language because they are unable to peruse carriers speaking their native language. It was also looked down upon children in schools who were not native English speakers, so to give their children the biggest chance many parents decided not to teach their native tongue to their children.

Many historical events and transformations have contributed to language loss over the past several centuries. These reasons include Western expansion and colonisation and the conquest and domination of indigenous people. Under colonial rule, native languages may have been outlawed language, or native populations decimated by disease or warfare. For example, after the European colonisation of Australia more than 100 aboriginal languages have gone extinct. Even without foreign domination, in many countries ethnic minority groups who speak minority language have also suffered from persecution that sometimes continues today. A Chinese linguist, for example, was arrested for opening a school in his community's language Uighur⁵.

Political factors such as the growth and consolidation of nation states also caused languages to go extinct. When previously autonomous regions or ethnic minority groups are incorporated into larger nation, languages can become more standardized and smaller dialects or minority languages are lost. Currently globalisation, urbanisation, and the spread of information technology and media, also can contribute to language loss by standardising and disseminating one language over local dialects. Once isolated villages or regions with a certain dialect or language no longer transfer it to the next generation as only the dominant language is used in schools or the media. Non-written or non-documented languages have an even smaller chance of surviving, or being revived when the last speakers dies.

To preserve languages, energy needs to be directed into expanding the uses of minority languages to accommodate the modern society. The language needs to be used in everyday life, education, business, writing, arts, and media. Support for language preservation need to come from both local communities and national governments¹. A growth in technology has opened a new possibility to develop tools to help preserve languages.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved:

Most countries have an endangered language. Those countries with the most diverse languages often have the most endangered languages, sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas, and Melanesia have some of the most endanger languages. Currently almost all minority languages in the US and Canada are endangered.

United States of America- Was the home to almost 200 indigenous languages from Onondaga in New York state a native American language to Aleut in Alaska. Now 54 languages have gone extinct in the USA and 75 more are critically endangered. Not to mention the 37 Severely endangered, the 23 Defiantly Endangered, and the 11 vulnerable languages in the USA.

Canada- Canada also is the home of about 80 endangered languages, already three are extinct.

Brazil- Is also one of the most language diverse nations in the world but it also has 180 endangered and vulnerable languages, and 12 extinct languages.

Papa New Guinea- has 90 endanger languages and 9 extinct.

Ethiopia- Has 24 endangered languages and 4 are already extinct⁶.

UNESCO is a very involved with language preservation. UNESCO has created a and list of nine aspects that should be considered when assessing endangered languages: intergenerational transmission, number of speakers, proportion of speakers within the population, shifts in fields of language use, materials for language education, community members attitude towards their own language, quality and amount of documentation, and government/institutions attitudes and policies towards the language. They have also created The World Atlas of Endangered languages to raise awareness of language extinction.⁷

Relevant UN Resolutions:

The United Nations has worked to preserve languages starting by in 1993 in the conference of human rights:

A/Res/48/121

Adopted by the General assembly on the 20th of December 1993 during the 85th session, on *The Declaration of Vienna of the World Conference on Human Rights*

This resolution was concerning the Declaration of Vienna. This resolution endorses the Declaration of Vienna, which states the right that: “persons belonging to minorities to use their own language”

Resolution available at: <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r121.htm>

⁶UNESCO (2010). Visited: 3/1/2018. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap>

⁷ UNESCO (2017). Visited: 3/1/18. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/language-vitality/>

Declaration of Vienna available at:

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/OHCHR20/VDPA_booklet_English.pdf

A/Res/56/262 (Part II)

Passed in the General Assembly of the United Nations on the 9th of April 2002 during the 56th session, on *Multilingualism*.

Available at: [https://documents-dds-](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N01/497/60/PDF/N0149760.pdf?OpenElement)

[ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N01/497/60/PDF/N0149760.pdf?OpenElement](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N01/497/60/PDF/N0149760.pdf?OpenElement)

A/Res/61/295

Adopted by the general assembly on the 13th of September 2007, during the 107th session, on *The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Available: http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf

And the UN will continue to fight for language preservation, the UN General assembly adopted a resolution on the Rights of indigenous peoples, emphasising the need to preserve endangered languages. In that resolution, they also announced that 2019 would be the International Year of Indigenous Languages.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue:

There are many organisations that have worked towards preserving languages, including but not limited to Language Documentation and conservation, Living Tongues organisation, Endangered Language Fund, Foundation of endangered languages, and many more⁸.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural organisation) has worked extensively on language preservation through various projects in education, in culture, in communication, and in science. In education, they promote multilingualism and mother tongue literacy, and raised awareness of the importance of language preservation in education. In culture UNESCO collects data on endangered languages, developed tools and methodologies, and builds capacities of governments, speaker communities, and academic institutions to protect their language. UNESCO also promotes the use of local languages in media and endorses a diverse use of languages online. In science, they assist in local indicatives to promote transmission of local and indigenous knowledge embodied in endangered languages⁹.

⁸ Lindsey, K. L. (2015). Visited: 3/1/2018. Available at: <http://katelynnlindsey.weebly.com/become-a-language-activist.html>

⁹ UNESCO (2017). Visited: 3/1/2018. Available at: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/faq-on-endangered-languages/>

SIL International (Summer institute of linguistics) is a Christian non-profit organisation that works to preserve languages. SIL primarily works with research, training, transcription and translation. They started by translating the bible into different languages that had no written form, this helped preserve the languages as it was a now documented, and easier to revive if it becomes extinct¹⁰.

Possible Solutions:

There are numerous possible solutions but many require significant support from governments and NGOs. Some believe that if nations collect more information about minority languages within their borders, governments will be able to give the necessary support to save the languages. Supporting and building schools that teach in native languages is one key initiative. Documentation of languages especially those that were not written would also be a good way to prevent language extinction. Governments can support NGOs that provide language help. Protect minorities from persecution, provide or support media in minority languages would also help preserve language diversity. Emphasise the importance of intergenerational transmission and help create a safe environment for speakers of minority languages to help raise that status of the language. Technology can also be a vital resource in the future solutions to the issue, computers can be used to document previously non-written languages. Computers can also reduce the price of publishing in a native language and help spread knowledge and literacy through the electronic documents and programs. Additionally, technology can be used to compile dictionaries that are more extensive than those previously created by linguists. Technology can also help keep speakers connected. Native speakers can be few and far apart. With modern technology, they can communicate with each other in their native language. To save languages it requires support from all levels of society the natives, individual linguists, NGOs and governmental organisations¹¹.

¹⁰SIL (2017). Visited 3/1/2018. Available at: <https://www.sil.org/about>

¹¹Russell, B. H. (9/2000). Visited:4/1/18. Available at: <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/preserving-language-diversity-computers-can-be-tool-making>

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<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001924/192416e.pdf>

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UNESCO (2017). Visited: 3/1/18. Available at:
<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/language-vitality/>

Other useful websites:

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/social/preserving-indigenous-languages.html>

<https://www.languagemagazine.com/2017/01/13/2019-international-year-of-indigenous-languages/>

<https://www.npr.org/2013/02/24/172821796/the-language-of-empires-faces-extinction>

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=142396228>