



Committee: Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee (GA3)

Issue: Preservation of endangered languages and dialects

Student Officer: Joanna Sakkadas

Position: Co-Chair

INTRODUCTION

There is an estimate of over 6,000 languages spoken worldwide, yet many of the more ancient languages have been long gone. Languages have been continuously dying out over the centuries but at a slow rate. However, in the more recent centuries, languages have started to become extinct or under threat of becoming extinct at a higher and faster rate. Currently there are approximately 3,000 languages that are said to be endangered, with many others that show signs of becoming endangered in the future. Organizations have started to recognize this issue and in turn have started to make slow progress towards solving the issue, but it is still a pressing issue as mass extinction of languages is a growing threat. The problem has been under the radar for the most part, until more recently, when the international community started to acknowledge the scale of this issue and is now trying to combat it. This issue is mainly due to the speakers being integrated in communities that do not speak their language and thus over time the speakers are likely to stop speaking the language entirely. Furthermore, there aren't enough children-native speakers of the language, so, as the next generations come, they never get the chance to learn the language and over time this language dies out. Many dialects are lost with the expansion of larger communities and theirs contracting in return. However, there are ways to prevent this process or, at least, slow it down and many governments have started implementing measures to combat it.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Endangered

Often refers to a species that is threatened by extinction, but when it comes to languages and/or dialects it is any language/dialect that is “dying out” and will most likely not be heard of in the future, in terms of the number of people being able to speak, read, or write it.

Languages/Dialects

The main difference between languages and dialects is something linguists refer to as "mutual indelibility". This concept applies when speakers of two languages can understand each other without prior knowledge of the other languages, and then, these two languages are considered dialects of the same language.

Native speakers

Native speakers are defined as people that learnt their language naturally through their childhood development, because they were exposed to it by their parents and their everyday environments, such as school and the community in which they were raised.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

For the longest time we have been in a “linguistic equilibrium” which means that the number of languages lost was roughly equal to those created. Therefore, in the past, there was no fear of mass extinction of languages like there is today. In the past, people had been shifting the language they spoke, either due to them moving countries or areas where a different language was spoken, or their own land was invaded, thus leading to more and more languages to be threatened. Over half of the world’s spoken languages are found in the rural and indigenous areas. The major languages such as English, Chinese, and Spanish make up only a small percentage of the overall languages yet, they are the ones spoken by the most people, thus upsetting the balance, as seen below.

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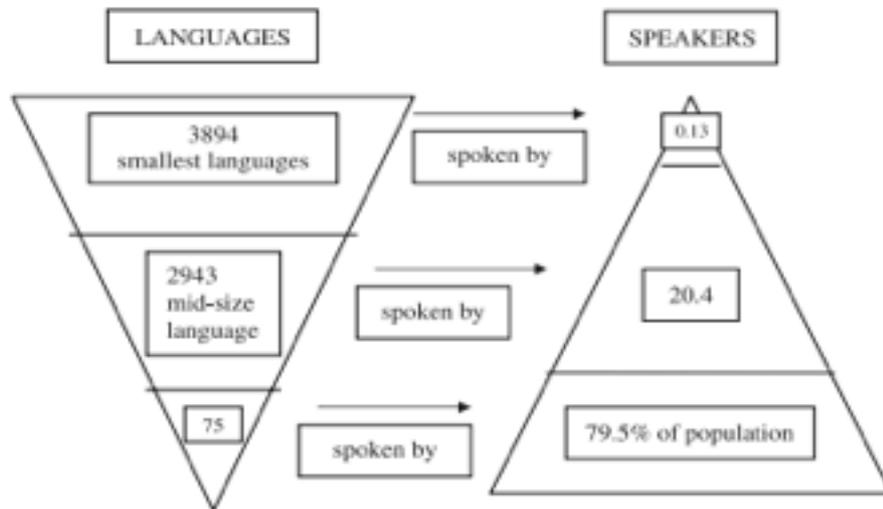


Fig. 1. Inverse relation between number of languages and size of population.

Expansion of Territory

The expansion of one territory into the neighbouring is one of the greatest factors, when it comes to why so many languages are under the threat of extinction. This is because, with the newly acclaimed land, the invader will often integrate people speaking different languages/dialects, in order to establish dominance. This often leads to dialects no longer being used and hence becoming entirely extinct. We often see this happening in rural villages, with an example being what has happened countless times in China. Along with its expanding empire and great development in terms of land, we have seen the takeover of Mandarin. The same thing has happened with countries such as Japan and India. Wars have also played a role, since the damage often caused led to villages along with languages/dialects being severely harmed. This happened a lot during World War II, for example with the German settlement of Gottschee, where most of its inhabitants fled for America.

Educational System and Youth

In most areas where a language/dialect is threatened, children often do not speak it, so ultimately that language dies out. This is mainly due to that fact that their

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educational system is either lacking or has completely stopped teaching this particular language and therefore, it disappears through the generations. When an area is also taken over by a foreign invader, the youth is most often affected, as they no longer listen to their native language in their daily environment.



MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is the only European country that has languages/dialects that are under threat of extinction, such as Scottish Gaelic, Irish Gaelic and Welsh. Cornish used to be extinct in the 18th century but thanks to artificial means they have managed to “revive” it.

China

China has many dialects, yet the ones that are in danger of disappearing in the future are the ones in the north-east, western Xinjiang and in the far south, in Yunnan.

Mexico

There are at least 14 dialects under the threat of extinction, due to the heavy

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pressure from other languages, mainly Spanish, because of the great influx of Spanish speakers over the past centuries.

Greater Pacific Area

The Greater Pacific Area has lost over 49 languages during the past decades, along with many small dialects that are severely threatened by extinction due to territorial expansions and the little use by the younger generations.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO has made great headway in tackling the issue by raising awareness mainly through their publication of the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing. They have also been appointed by the General Assembly as the lead agency in reference to the 2008 International Year of Languages. Not only has UNESCO raised awareness but through their tactics they have also managed to detect endangered languages and other languages that may be threatened in the future, and gathered data on them to be able to prevent their extinction.

Permanent International Committee of Linguistics (CIPL)

In the more recent years CIPL has focused its attention on the endangered languages and has held multiple congresses such as the ones in Berlin in 1987, in Quebec in 1992 and Mexico in 2002. It consists of linguists from all over the world that exchange thoughts and try to deal with the issue to their best ability.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Description of Event
2008	The International Year of Languages was announced by the General Assembly.
May 2013	At SOAS, University of London, they declared for the 20 th – 28 th be the Endangered Languages Week with aims to raise

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	awareness through various seminars, films, demonstrations, workshops, a debate, and more. This event turned out to be a great success with a large outcome of people which, in turn, raised awareness throughout the country.
2014	The first public archive of every language in the world was created in New York City still running till today, documenting different languages.
2014	The Centre for Endangered Languages is an independent organization that was established aiming to research and document lesser known languages and languages that face extinction.
2015	Endangered Languages Documentation Program (ELDP) was created at SOAS, University of London, to document endangered languages and encourage students and provide training in their documentation.
2018	Cambridge Endangered Languages and Culture Group (CELC) started to pursue various endangered languages and cultures for their documentation, bringing together linguists and anthropologists to raise awareness among scholars.

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

- The General Assembly declared 2008 to be the International Year of Languages and appointed UNESCO as their lead agency.
- The 2000/222 Economic and Social Committee resolution helping indigenous cultures,

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including their languages and dialects.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Multiple committees have been set up by the UN such as the Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation. This committee has made great headway in its aims to promote strategies to assist and support the maintenance and revitalization of languages at risk, along with offering training along with appropriate supplies to do so. Organizations, such as UNESCO, have also made many attempts to solve the issue most of them still ongoing projects with more long term effects.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

There are many possible solutions so as to overcome this issue, as we have seen many times in the past with Welsh and Cornish for example. One of the main solutions that most governments go for is to teach the younger generations, as early as possible, in hope that they will one day pass the language on to the next generation and thus this particular language will not die out. This, however, has not been most effective in the past, since it is hard to maintain speaking the language if it is not spoken at home, within the family. Another solution is to raise awareness amongst the people through various methods, such as via the media. Some countries have also made compulsory street and road signs in the languages prone to extinction. Governments can also provide funding for the preservation of endangered languages and dialects. Wales also has all official documents such as council tax reports and all voting procedural papers written in Welsh and English. Finally, a method that some countries have used in the past is hiring speakers of the endangered language/dialects in governmental positions who can deal with issues and communicate in that language.

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International year of languages

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Preserving languages (graphs)

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1749-818X.2007.00004.x>

CELP

<https://www.linguisticsociety.org/about/who-we-are/committees/endangered-languages-and-their-preservation-celp>

National Geographic's disappearing languages

<https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2018/04/saving-dying-disappearing-languages-wikitongues-culture/>

Endangered Languages Week

<https://www.soas.ac.uk/endangered-languages/index.php?showprevious=1>

Cambridge Endangered Languages and Culture Group

<http://groups.ds.cam.ac.uk/celc/>

Language Nest

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