

**Committee:** Social, Cultural and Humanitarian Committee (GA3)

**Topic:** Preservation of Endangered Languages and Dialects

**Student Officer:** Nancy Liakou

**Position:** Co-chair

### Topic Introduction

A language is more than just words, it showcases the lives of the people who speak and write it and paints pictures of their pasts and histories. Languages build a connection to one's culture and history and allows them to understand more about their ancestry. Dialects, which are branches of one language and are specific to different regions, also allow individuals to identify with their heritage. The similarity of the dialects bring communities closer together and unify individuals.

Many languages are falling out of use and are being replaced by others that are more widely used such as English in the United States of America. or Spanish in Mexico. Most endangered languages become extinct as successive generations begin to lose proficiency in their traditional languages.

Preserving a language at risk of dying out means preserving its traditions, stories, and wisdom. As communities lose their language, they often also lose parts of their cultural traditions which are connected to that language, such as songs, myths, poetry, local remedies, ecological and geological knowledge and language behaviors that are not easily translated. Linguistic research contributes to developing further knowledge of traditions around the world that are often not documented elsewhere which threatens communities' culture and heritage.



## Definition of key concepts

### Cultural Imperialism

Cultural imperialism is “the culture of a large and powerful country having a great influence on another less powerful country”<sup>1</sup>

### Dialect

A dialect is “a form of a language that people speak in a particular part of a country, containing some different words and grammar”<sup>2</sup>

### Endangered Language

An endangered language is a language that is at risk of disappearing as its speakers die out or shift to speaking other languages<sup>3</sup>

### Language

“a system of communication consisting of sounds, words, and grammar”<sup>4</sup>

### Language Death/Linguicide

Linguicide is “a linguistic term for the complete displacement of one language by another in a population of speakers.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. “CULTURAL IMPERIALISM | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” *Cambridge.org*, 13 Nov. 2019, [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cultural-imperialism](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/cultural-imperialism).

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. “DIALECT | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” *Cambridge.org*, 2019, [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dialect](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dialect).

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia Contributors. “Endangered Language.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Nov. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered_language).

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. “LANGUAGE | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary.” *Cambridge.org*, 2019, [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/language](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/language).

<sup>5</sup> Dictionary.com. “LANGUAGE DEATH | Meanings & Definitions of English Words.” *Dictionary.com*, [www.dictionary.com/browse/language-death](https://www.dictionary.com/browse/language-death).



### Language Revitalization

Language revitalization is “an attempt to halt or reverse the decline of a language or to revive an extinct one”<sup>6</sup>

### Background Information

#### Causes of language endangerment

##### War / Genocide

Wars create situations involving language contact that can both disturb and threaten the language of the regions involved. In most cases the language with a higher prestige and popularity replaces other languages by prohibiting their use. Languages may also be seen as undesirable or associated with the enemy, leading to efforts to eradicate or suppress them. The lack of use of these languages leads to their endangerment or even extinction.

##### Natural disasters

Any natural disaster severe enough to wipe out an entire population of native language speakers has the capability of endangering a language and leading to language death. Communities would be forced to evacuate their homes and migrate to other regions or countries where their native language is not spoken. This displacement can disrupt the daily use of their language. In some cases, people spread and migrate to various countries so it becomes difficult to maintain a cohesive language-speaking group, leading to reduced language use among dispersed individuals.

##### Disease and Famine

Disease and famine also contribute to language loss as they significantly increase mortality rates. Epidemics can cause the deaths of many native speakers, particularly elders who often possess the most advanced knowledge of the language. If a communicable disease affects smaller, vulnerable communities, it is very unlikely that there will be any fluent speakers left to pass on the language.

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<sup>6</sup> “Language Revitalization.” *Wikipedia*, 2 June 2023, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language\\_revitalization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_revitalization).



Cultural marginalization

Cultural discrimination discourages speakers from using a language in favor of another more prestigious one. Minority languages may be associated with lower social status, leading to a lack of pride in one's linguistic heritage. This cultural stigma creates an incentive for parents to stop teaching their children the language to avoid discrimination and in some cases children refuse to learn the language due to the stigma. Other forms of cultural imperialism include religion; religious groups may hold the belief that the use of a certain language is immoral or require its followers to speak only one language that is the approved language of the religion. An example of this is the language of the Quran, Arabic, which pressures many North African groups to speak the language.<sup>7</sup>

Intermarriage

Mixed marriages may also contribute to language shifts in households because they can lead to a change in language use patterns among minority language speakers and their children. This means that the likelihood of preserving a minority language is greater in marriages among individuals who speak the same indigenous language than in situations in which spouses speak different languages

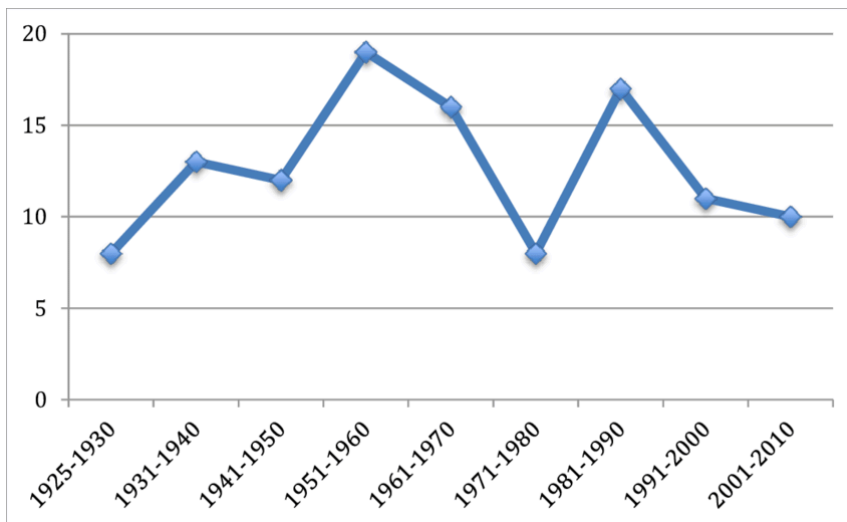


Figure 1: Number of Language articles on endangered languages by decade<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia Contributors. "Endangered Language." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Nov. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered\\_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered_language).

<sup>8</sup> Whaley, Lindsay. *Number of Language Articles on Endangered Languages by Decade*. Jan. 2014, [www.researchgate.net/figure/Number-of-Language-articles-on-endangered-languages-by-decade\\_fig2\\_269462334](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Number-of-Language-articles-on-endangered-languages-by-decade_fig2_269462334)



### Impacts

#### Impacts on communities

As communities lose their language, they often also lose parts of their cultural traditions such as songs, myths, poetry, local remedies, ecological and geological knowledge and language behaviors that are not easily translated. This creates an obstacle for linguists trying to interpret and understand traditional practices which could lead to mistranslations when reconstructing the cultures history.

Language behavior and speech reflects the social structure of different communities. This pattern is even more prominent in dialects due to how similar they are to one another. This may weaken the sense of identity of the individual, resulting in indigenous values and practices to be replaced with new ones. Language can also be considered as scientific knowledge in topics such as medicine, philosophy, botany, and many more as it reflects a community's practices when dealing with the environment and each other. When a language is lost, this knowledge is lost as well.

#### Impacts on languages

During language loss, fewer people speak the language which results in a decline in fluency. Speakers usually mix the endangered language with more dominant languages, leading to the creation of hybrid forms. There's also a significant reduction in vocabulary. Specific terms and expressions may be forgotten or replaced by those from dominant languages, resulting in a reduced and simplified vocabulary.

### Major countries/ organizations and alliances

#### Papua New Guinea

When Papua New Guinea became independent, the government chose 3 languages for official use - English, Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu<sup>9</sup>. Speakers were prohibited from using their own dialects which led to language endangerment and extinction as successive generations couldn't learn the dialect. Now

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<sup>9</sup> Orere, Barney. "PNG Languages in Danger of Going Extinct." *Post Courier*, 5 Nov. 2023, [www.postcourier.com.pg/png-languages-in-danger-of-going-extinct/](http://www.postcourier.com.pg/png-languages-in-danger-of-going-extinct/).



there are 852 living languages although 12 are known to have no living speakers left in Papua New Guinea<sup>10</sup>.

### Australia

In Australia, more than 250 Indigenous languages and over 750 dialects were originally spoken<sup>11</sup>. However, only 40 languages are still spoken, with just 12<sup>12</sup> being learned by children. Language is a central part of the Aboriginal culture. Many non-indigenous Australians mistake indigenous languages for dialects of one larger language but the estimated 300 indigenous Australian languages were about as different from one another as the major languages spoken today. Aboriginal Australians now make up about just 3 percent of Australia's<sup>13</sup> population.

### The Language Conservancy (TLC)

The Language Conservancy is a non profit organization that works closely with dozens of communities in Canada, Australia and Mexico with the goal of revitalizing endangered and extinct languages. In partnership with educators and linguistic experts, TLC uses technology to build language resources and to distribute them to community members. In 2023, they supported the

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<sup>10</sup> Orere, Barney. "PNG Languages in Danger of Going Extinct." *Post Courier*, 5 Nov. 2023, [www.postcourier.com.pg/png-languages-in-danger-of-going-extinct/](http://www.postcourier.com.pg/png-languages-in-danger-of-going-extinct/).

<sup>11</sup> Steele, Carly, et al. "We Are on the Brink of Losing Indigenous Languages in Australia – Could Schools Save Them?" *The Conversation*, 2022, [theconversation.com/we-are-on-the-brink-of-losing-indigenous-languages-in-australia-could-schools-save-them-184736](http://theconversation.com/we-are-on-the-brink-of-losing-indigenous-languages-in-australia-could-schools-save-them-184736).

<sup>12</sup> Steele, Carly, et al. "We Are on the Brink of Losing Indigenous Languages in Australia – Could Schools Save Them?" *The Conversation*, 2022, [theconversation.com/we-are-on-the-brink-of-losing-indigenous-languages-in-australia-could-schools-save-them-184736](http://theconversation.com/we-are-on-the-brink-of-losing-indigenous-languages-in-australia-could-schools-save-them-184736).

<sup>13</sup> VOA. "Saving a Critically Endangered Language in Australia." *VOA, VOA - Voice of America English News*, 23 July 2018, [learningenglish.voanews.com/a/saving-a-critically-endangered-language/4491390.html](http://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/saving-a-critically-endangered-language/4491390.html).



creation of 71 books<sup>14</sup>, including textbooks, dictionaries, picture books and coloring books which are now being used by children all over North America.

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

### The Indigenous Languages Decade

Attempting to slow down the loss of these languages, the United Nations (UN) launched the Indigenous Languages Decade (2022-2032). The aim is to guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples to preserve, revitalize and promote their languages in sustainable development efforts. The decade raises awareness on the issue but isn't actively preventing language loss.

### Endangered Languages Project (ELP)

The Endangered Languages Project uses technology to document languages and dialects. People can upload their languages online by submitting information or samples in the form of text, audio or video files. As of 2020, the ELP has cataloged over 3000 endangered languages in its ELCat covering 180 countries/territories throughout the world<sup>15</sup>. This has decreased the number of languages going extinct and creates the opportunity for linguists to revitalize the language and for future generations to learn it. However this is only accessible online so isolated tribes and communities are not able to document their language.

### UNESCO's endangered language classification

UNESCO operates with 6 levels of language endangerment:

Safe: all generations speak the language

Vulnerable: most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains

Definitely endangered: children no longer learn the language as a 'mother tongue' in the home

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<sup>14</sup> "2023 TLC Annual Report." *Indd.adobe.com*, 2023, [indd.adobe.com/view/3b59dac1-7ddd-405e-a566-b4388cd39961](https://indd.adobe.com/view/3b59dac1-7ddd-405e-a566-b4388cd39961).

<sup>15</sup> "Endangered Languages Project." *Wikipedia*, 7 Apr. 2024, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered\\_Languages\\_Project#:~:text=around%20the%20world.-](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Endangered_Languages_Project#:~:text=around%20the%20world.-)



Severely endangered: 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

Critically endangered: the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently

Extinct: there are no speakers left

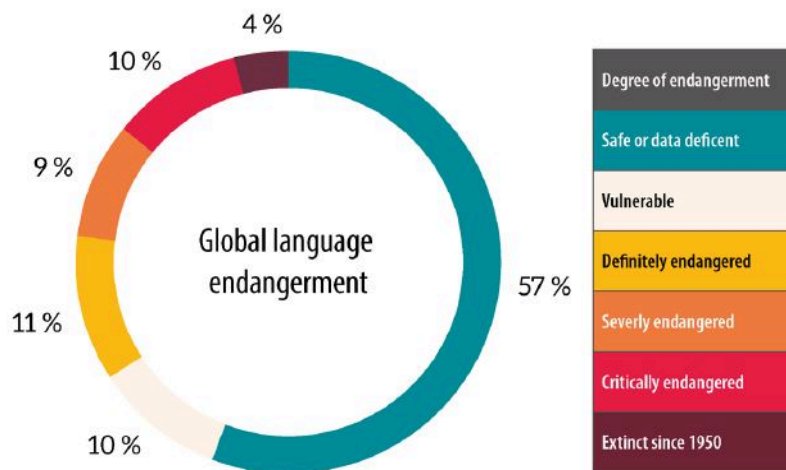


Figure 2: Degrees of Language Endangerment in 2011<sup>16</sup>

The graph above shows that in 2011, 43% of 7,168 living languages were endangered or extinct. According to the Visual Capitalist<sup>17</sup>, in 2013 the number remained the same, (43%) are classified as endangered so no progress has been made.

<sup>16</sup> “Degrees of Language Endangerment.” *Epthinktank*, 25 Sept. 2019, [epthinktank.eu/2019/09/26/multilingualism-the-language-of-the-european-union/degrees-of-language-endangerment-2/](http://epthinktank.eu/2019/09/26/multilingualism-the-language-of-the-european-union/degrees-of-language-endangerment-2/).

<sup>17</sup> Jones, Stephen. *All the World’s Endangered Languages, by Country*. 15 Mar. 2024, [www.visualcapitalist.com/cp/all-the-worlds-endangered-languages-by-country/](http://www.visualcapitalist.com/cp/all-the-worlds-endangered-languages-by-country/).



## Possible solutions

### Policy Implementation

Governments could adopt policies that recognize and support linguistic diversity. For example, granting endangered languages official legal status of recognition and legitimizing the language. This can promote their use in public and official domains which would increase the number of people using the language. Governments can also ensure language rights, such as the right to use one's native language in education, media, and government, which can also protect and promote endangered languages.

### Educational Initiatives

One way to preserve languages is to encourage younger generations to speak their native language as they grow, so that they will then teach their children the language as well. Introducing local native languages in schools would further accelerate this process. Governments also should integrate endangered languages into school curriculums and support bilingual or multilingual teaching that can help children learn in both their native language and the dominant language. Conferences, workshops, and publications could also offer support for individuals, schools, and communities trying to preserve languages. Providing specialized training for teachers in endangered languages can further improve the quality and availability of language education.

### Technological Innovation

Technology can also be used to preserve the integrity of spoken versions of languages and ensure linguistic knowledge for future generations. Preservationists can use reel-to-reel audio tape recordings, video recordings, written records and podcasts for the documentation and archiving of endangered languages. They can also develop and distribute digital tools that facilitate language learning and use. Promoting and funding media content in endangered languages, such as TV shows, radio programs, and online content, can also increase the visibility and use of the language.



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