



**Forum:** United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization

**Issue:** The question of addressing the threat of language loss and promoting language diversity

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## Introduction

More than half of all currently existing languages are expected to be lost by the end of the century, with some research suggesting as many as 95%. While there are around 6,700 languages spoken worldwide, it is estimated that Indigenous peoples, less than 6% of the global population, speak more than 4,000 of them. This means that the majority of languages are being spoken by a minority and any threats to those groups may result in a multitude of languages lost. Such threats to indigenous groups can come in many forms, from globalisation and colonisation to climate change. It is vital these endangered languages are preserved as they are more than just a means of communication; a language is the representation of a society's legacy, culture and identity, an irreplaceable entity once lost. As it is currently the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL, 2022-2032), there is no better time for an initiative to be taken to mitigate this issue than now.

The loss of a language being a relatively abstract concept means that the statistics vary greatly depending on how a group defines such a loss. While some claim that a language dies every two weeks, others say the number is as high as 40 days. Regardless, every death is a huge loss to humanity, as the ways of thinking that language induces, and its impact, can never again be experienced. The decade dedicated to Indigenous Languages is a result of the International Year of Indigenous Languages (2019) as an attempt to further implement and build upon the initiatives taken that year. The problem is one of great complexity and depth, and to tackle it, its causes need to be understood.

## Background Information

The primary cause for such a high rate of language loss is the presence of a few, dominating cultures and languages which have overshadowed indigenous ones. A rise in the popularity of certain languages may be caused by a variety of reasons, including globalisation, which encourages the integration of global communities, and in turn a homogeneous system of communication. The effects of globalisation on languages can be seen in the case of Latin American languages like Aymara and Quechua, which are slowly being replaced by Spanish. If indigenous languages like these are not promoted or preserved, they may be completely extinct following a few generations. In general, there has been a rising trend in the number of speakers of a few, common, languages like English, Chinese and Spanish. Their popularity means people may forgo communication in their own languages to enjoy the wider range of opportunities which come as a result of knowing these languages, from more valuable academic qualifications to more job opportunities.

Similarly, colonisation is a more extreme and open way in which languages are abandoned. This links closely to other reasons like war and occupation of land, as these scenarios have the common denominator of an authority imposing on the rights of local people, usually a minority, which may include the right to speak their language. Genocide also falls under this category as, unsurprisingly, destroying an ethnic group or nation will also mean destroying their language. An example of when authorities took away the right of language from a certain group is when in the 1900s, the United States, Canada, Australia and Scandinavian nations placed Indigenous children in boarding schools after forcibly removing them from their families. In these schools, the use of their native language or any representation of their culture, including traditional clothing, hairstyles and personal belongings were all banned. Even if the extensive claims about the physical, sexual, cultural and spiritual abuse in punishment for such acts are ignored, it is hardly surprising that significant trauma has been caused to entire communities, and their languages, who had to give away their children and their futures. It is also not surprising that the 1920s saw an extinction of 50% of indigenous languages in the countries that implemented this system.

Moreover, another side to this dilemma that needs to be considered is the people who willingly, either completely or partially, give up their native language. One reason they may do so is to incorporate themselves into a new society following immigration from their native lands. Such a migration may be caused by war or globalisation as mentioned above, but also natural disasters and a lack of development or opportunity in their homeland. Climate change has caused a sharp increase in the number of such natural disasters and displacements, as seen by the estimated 23.7 million internal displacements in 2021 caused by natural disasters. Once a group of people is displaced, a huge part of their identity is removed and they may abandon

their native language and culture in an attempt to fit into their new society. It may also cause the community to be fragmented and dispersed, another reason why they may stop speaking their native tongues.

Furthermore, there are those who stop speaking or teaching their language due to an underrepresentation of it. Technology plays a huge role in this, because as advanced as it has become, its features rarely include lesser-known languages. For example, 52% of the internet's web content is in English and the other languages represented are less than 6% each, including Spanish at 5.5%, even though it was the fourth most spoken language in the world in 2023. This puts into perspective how neglectful a system which does not even cater to the most common languages in the world will be to lesser-known, indigenous languages. Similarly, one of the largest operating systems, Microsoft Windows, offers around 100 languages, and IOS offers around 40. This means that out of the 6,700 languages being spoken, many of them cannot be found or used alongside technology, limiting the people who speak those languages from access to various technologies. In addition, another way such languages may find themselves underrepresented are through legal systems. In order to interact with a legal system that does not support their language, speakers of minor languages may find themselves giving up their native tongues. For example, Indigenous people emigrating from Central America and Mexico to the United States of America find themselves without interpretation facilities for their own languages, preventing them from seeking medical aid or speaking about their legal cases.

While there are a plethora of reasons for a steep decline in the number of languages being spoken in the world, addressing some of the more pressing ones, including those detailed above, would be a strong start in addressing this issue and achieving a future of language diversity.

## Major Countries and Organisations Involved

- **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):**  
UNESCO is leading global efforts to protect and preserve indigenous languages through various projects such as the Global Action Plan for the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032). It is also the lead UN agency for this decade dedicated to Indigenous Languages, working alongside the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).

- Permanent International Committee of Linguists (CIPL):** A non-profit and non-governmental organisation, CIPL coordinates communication and congresses amongst linguists around the world. The International Congress of Linguists (ICL), founded by the CIPL, first took place in 1928. Since 1957 onward, the congress has been organised to take place every 5 years. Currently, more than 1000 linguists attend it, from all over the world. This organisation is known for working closely with UNESCO, sponsoring projects including those related to the issue of endangered languages.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
1992	The CIPL starts giving particular attention to Endangered Languages. This decision was made based on a petition filed in 1987 and led to a huge increase in awareness of this issue amongst linguists. The CIPL has managed to contribute a significant number of grants to promote work in this field since then.
November 17th 1999	The United Nations (UN) declares the 21st of February as the International Mother Language Day
2010	The Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger is published by UNESCO to record endangered languages and raise awareness about them.
December 19th 2016	The UN declares the year 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages to raise awareness and benefit Indigenous communities.
October 19th 2019	The UN declares the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) in an attempt to further implement and build upon the initiatives taken in 2019.

## Challenges and Obstacles

- **Lack of access to resources:** Indigenous people may not have access to the resources which could be used to preserve their language. An example of one such resource would be technology.
- **Lack of support from local agencies or the government:** If authorities are not willing to recognise or cater to lesser-known languages, these languages may naturally die out.
- **Loss of culture:** Factors including colonisation, globalisation and migration can contribute to a loss of traditional knowledge and values, which can lead to a disconnect between the speakers and the meaningful roots of their languages, making it difficult to preserve.
- **Lack of knowledgeable individuals to aid the process:** It will certainly be tough to preserve an endangered language if it has reached a point where the remaining speakers are not well-versed enough, or there simply are not enough of them, to do the language justice in its preservation.
- **Stigmatisation:** Indigenous languages are commonly stigmatised, leading to speakers of the language facing discrimination and discouragement when using it. An example may be certain communities regarding such languages to be backward or uneducated.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The United Nations (UN) has been actively working to aid endangered languages, specifically UNESCO which is leading the initiatives for the IDIL. The decade dedicated to Indigenous languages perseveres for an increase in awareness of diverse and endangered languages, promoting policy changes which encourage their preservation and empowering Indigenous groups to establish their native languages. An example of their work would be the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, a record of endangered languages from around the globe. The agency also provides financial aid to language revitalisation projects, increasing the use of these languages in education and daily life.

Moreover, an indirect way the UN helps the cause is through its commitment to establishing the rights of Indigenous people. This is particularly highlighted by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) adopted in 2007 which includes their right to culture, self-determination, education, and language. While not directly related to the issue of language loss, Indigenous peoples speak the majority of all

languages, especially the ones at risk of extinction, meaning their empowerment plays a vital role in avoiding the large-scale extinction of languages worldwide.

While the UN addresses this broad and complex issue in various ways, there are also specific examples of the revival of endangered languages as a result of certain governments or communities attempting to save a language. For instance in New Zealand, only 5% of the Māori youth spoke Māori in the 1970s. Due to the initiatives taken since, such as “immersion schools”, which teach children in a chosen language, in this case, Māori, more than 25% of the Māori youth could speak their native tongue by 2023. Similarly, the number of native speakers of Hawaiian was only 2,000 in the 1970s, due to a 91-year ban on the language, but has risen considerably to more than 18,700 by 2023.

Furthermore, technology is a fundamental tool that has been utilised in spreading and preserving endangered languages. An example of it being used for such is the educational platform Rosetta Stone which partnered with the Chickasaw Nation in 2015 to teach the Chickasaw language to its citizens. The educational tool delivered lessons created alongside native Chickasaw speakers and made them available to Chickasaw citizens, free of cost. In addition, while there is still a wide range of languages not currently compatible with modern technology, major technology companies have been acknowledging this dilemma over the past decade. This includes Google, which has certain Indigenous languages on its translation software, such as Aymara, Quechua and Guarani. The company Meta also partnered with Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (NTI) and added the language Inuktitut to Facebook, in an attempt to increase the use of the critically endangered Inuit language.

## Possible Solutions

- **Improve Indigenous peoples’ access to and quality of education:** One of the rights stated in Article 14 of the UNDRIP is the Indigenous peoples’ right to establish educational institutions in their own language. Promoting this idea is one way to normalise the use of Indigenous languages and ensure it is passed on to the next generation. Using an endangered or Indigenous language as a medium for education, alongside teaching the language itself, can increase the number of native speakers, as seen in the case of Māori and Hawaiian. It should be noted that this may require further training of teachers, developing or modifying educational materials and even the support of native speakers from the community.

- **Recognising Indigenous languages as co-official languages:** Governments should be encouraged to do so as endorsing the use of Indigenous languages at the constitutional level validates and protects their right to exist. At the very least, Member States should ensure their legal systems cater to major and relevant Indigenous groups.
- **Create resources, if not to teach, to preserve endangered languages:** Creating records for these languages, including not just aspects like syntax and punctuation but their context, history and nuances, will at least ensure it never fully dies out. It may not be possible to create an educational system, however small, for every endangered language but such documentation will allow the language to live beyond its last speaker and even allow future generations to learn from or refer to it.
- **Ensure the UNDRIP is implemented in all Member States:** The declaration provides a framework for the establishment and well-being of Indigenous peoples around the world. This includes their right to community, religion and education, which beyond providing them with the freedom and dignity they deserve, will encourage their native languages to be sustained.

## Questions for Considerations

1. Apart from education in the relevant language, how can the use of endangered languages be normalised? Can social media or the media in general play a role?
2. What can local communities do to accommodate Indigenous peoples, especially considering those who have migrated from their native lands?
3. Are there any practical measures which will help reduce the stigma surrounding Indigenous languages? Will raising awareness inspire people to become more open-minded and inclusive?
4. How can governments and organisations cater to Indigenous languages? Consider different settings (legal, professional, recreational, etc.) and whether encouraging access to interpretation services will be enough.

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