

Language Vitality and Endangerment

UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages

I. By Way of Introduction¹

Recent History

UNESCO's active involvement in fostering the world's language diversity² is very recent, but builds upon initiatives of the last two decades. In the 1980s, UNESCO began to highlight language diversity as a crucial element of the cultural diversity of the world. Under the leadership of the late Stephen Wurm, UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Section launched the programme of the *Red Book of Languages in Danger of disappearing*. At the time when UNESCO undertook a new project 'Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' in 1997, language as such was not included. By September 2001, however, participants at the International Jury for the Proclamation of Masterpieces recommended that UNESCO establish an endangered language programme in addition to the Masterpieces Project. In the same year the 31st Session of the General Conference of UNESCO stressed the importance of linguistic diversity by adopting the Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity and in its action plan.

At the second International Conference on Endangered Languages in 2001 (held in Kyoto, as part of the Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim Project³) it became clear that UNESCO and endangered language advocates share the same goal: fostering language diversity. At the conference, Noriko Aikawa (the then Director of the International Centre for Human Sciences), Michael Krauss, Osahito Miyaoka, Osamu Sakiyama and Akira Yamamoto agreed that it was high time to initiate a call for coordination and cooperation of language advocates, linguists and their respective organizations.

UNESCO has begun a new phase to address the issue of language endangerment. A group of linguists and language advocates worked in collaboration with UNESCO from November 2001 and March 2003 to formulate ways of assessing language vitality and produced a set of guidelines that are given below.

One crucial point which is emphasized in this document was for all those involved to work hand in hand with the endangered language communities towards documentation, maintenance and revitalization of their languages. Any work in endangered language communities must be reciprocal and collaborative.

In March 2003 UNESCO organized, together with the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO, an International Expert Meeting as part of the programme on 'Safeguarding of Endangered Languages.'⁴ The goal was to define and reinforce UNESCO's role in supporting the world's endangered languages; participants included members of endangered language communities, linguists and NGOs (non-governmental organizations). Specifically the meeting aimed to: (1) formulate a definition of language endangerment and establish criteria to assess language endangerment (which resulted in

acceptance of the document ‘Language Vitality and Endangerment’); (2) review the state of languages in various regions of the world; (3) define the role of UNESCO; and (4) propose to UNESCO’s Director-General mechanisms and strategies to safeguard endangered languages and to maintain and promote linguistic and cultural diversity in the world.

Purpose of the Document

‘Language Vitality and Endangerment’ is designed to assist language communities, linguists, educators and administrators (including local and national governments and international organizations) in finding ways to enhance the vitality of threatened languages. The nine factors outlined in the document should allow interested parties to identify imperative needs. In most cases, immediate attention is required in the following areas: language documentation; pedagogical materials; the training of local linguists; the training of language teachers; new policy initiatives; public awareness-raising; technical, logistical and financial support (from, for example, individual language specialists, NGOs, local governments and international institutions).

Current and Future Tasks

The world faces new challenges in keeping its languages alive and meaningful. It is time for the peoples of the world to pool their resources and to build on the strengths of their linguistic and cultural diversity. This entails sharing resources at all levels: individual language specialists; local speech community; NGOs; governmental and institutional organizations.

Language specialists can identify what is required and provide support for language communities to maintain and enhance their languages. When speech communities request support to reinforce their threatened languages, language specialists should make their skills available to these communities in terms of planning, implementation and evaluation. Both speech community and language specialists should be involved at all points in the language vitalization process, and national and international organizations should provide continuous support to these activities.

The 2003 UNESCO Expert Meeting was a milestone for endangered language advocacy in that it drew international attention to the problem of maintaining language diversity. UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Section is prepared to play a major role in information dissemination. The Director-General of UNESCO affirmed his commitment to the development of general initiatives for the Endangered Languages Programme for 2004 and 2005 by allocating start-up funds. In the near future, an advisory group with worldwide representation will be formed.

The impact of the UNESCO Endangered Language Programme is largely dependent on the active involvement of linguists and language advocates, that is, on long-term active involvement. Yet it is the community members, not outsiders, who do or do not maintain their languages: it is their choice as to whether and in what way their languages should be revitalized, maintained and strengthened. This document is accordingly intended to be useful to community members as well as to concerned linguists and representatives of organizations.

II. Language Diversity in Danger

'I dream in Chamicuro,
but I cannot tell my dreams to anyone,
because no one else speaks Chamicuro.
It's lonely being the last one.'

(Natalia Sangama,
a Chamicuro grandmother, 1999)

Language diversity is essential to the human heritage. Each and every language embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people. The loss of any language is thus a loss for all humanity. Although approximately 6,000 languages still exist, many are under threat. There is an imperative need for language documentation, new policy initiatives and new materials to enhance the vitality of these languages. The cooperative efforts of language communities, language professionals, NGOs and governments will be indispensable in countering this threat. There is a pressing need to build support for language communities in their efforts to establish meaningful new roles for their endangered languages.

A language is *endangered* when it is on the path towards extinction. A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, either adults or children.

About 97 per cent of the world's population speak about 4 per cent of the world's languages; and conversely, about 96 per cent of the world's languages are spoken by about 3 per cent of the world's people (Bernard, 1996, p. 142). Most of the world's language heterogeneity, then, is under the stewardship of a very small number of people. Even languages with many thousands of speakers are no longer being acquired by children; at least 50 per cent of the world's more than 6,000 languages are losing speakers. We estimate that about 90 per cent of the languages may be replaced by dominant languages by the end of the twenty-first century.

Language endangerment may be the result of external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural or educational subjugation, or it may be caused by internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language. Internal pressures often have their source in external ones, and both halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. Many indigenous peoples, associating their disadvantaged social position with their culture, have come to believe that their languages are not worth retaining. They abandon their languages and cultures in hopes of overcoming discrimination, to secure a livelihood, and enhance social mobility, or to assimilate to the global marketplace.

The extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical and ecological knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world. Thus, the knowledge of any single language may be the key to answering fundamental questions of the future. Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in the structure and function of human language, human prehistory and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystems. Above

all, speakers of these languages may experience the loss of their language as a loss of their original ethnic and cultural identity (Bernard, 1992; Hale, 1998).

Actions to prevent language loss and to safeguard language diversity will only be successful when meaningful contemporary roles for minority languages can be established, for the requirements of modern life within the community as well as in national and international contexts. Meaningful contemporary roles include the use of these languages in everyday life, commerce, education, writing, the arts and/or the media. Economic and political support by both local communities and national governments are needed to establish such roles.

There is an urgent need in almost all countries for more reliable information on the situation of the minority languages as a basis for language support efforts at all levels.

Background

UNESCO's Constitution includes the maintenance and perpetuation of language diversity as a basic principle in order to:

contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world without distinction of race, sex, language, religion, by the Charter of the United Nations (UNESCO Constitution, Article 1).

As Noriko Aikawa (2001, p. 13) explains, 'based on this principle, UNESCO has developed programmes aimed at promoting languages as instruments of education and culture, and as significant means through which to participate in national life'.

Those programmes included *The Red Book of Languages in Danger of Disappearing*. The purpose of the project was:

1. to gather systematically information on endangered languages (including their status and the degree of urgency for undertaking research);
2. to strengthen research and the collection of materials relating to endangered languages for which little or no such activities have been undertaken to date, and which belong to a specific category such as language isolates, languages of special interest for typological and historical-comparative linguistics, and languages that are in imminent danger of extinction;
3. to undertake activities aimed at establishing a worldwide project committee and a network of regional centres as focal points for large areas on the basis of existing contacts; and
4. to encourage publication of materials and the results of studies on endangered languages.

One crucial goal, however, is missing from the *Red Book* project – that is, to work directly with the endangered language communities towards language maintenance, development, revitalization and perpetuation. Any research in endangered language communities must be reciprocal and collaborative. Reciprocity here entails researchers not only offering their services as a quid pro quo for what they receive from the speech community, but being more actively involved with the community in designing, implementing and evaluating their research projects.

As mentioned above, the UNESCO General Conference in October 2001 unanimously adopted the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity recognizing a relationship between biodiversity, cultural diversity and linguistic diversity. The associated action plan recommends that Member States, in conjunction with speaker communities, undertake steps to ensure:

1. sustaining the linguistic diversity of humanity and giving support to expression, creation and dissemination of the greatest possible number of languages;
2. encouraging linguistic diversity at all levels of education, wherever possible, and fostering the learning of several languages from the youngest age;
3. incorporating, where appropriate, traditional pedagogies into the education process with a view to preserving and making full use of culturally appropriate methods of communication and transmission of knowledge; and, where permitted by speaker communities, encouraging universal access to information in the public domain through the global network, including promoting linguistic diversity in cyberspace.

Supporting Endangered Languages

The Role of the Speech Community

In all parts of the world, members of ethnolinguistic minorities are increasingly abandoning their native language in favour of other languages, including in childrearing and non-formal education.

Among ethnolinguistic communities, a variety of opinions on the future prospects of their languages can be observed. Some speakers of endangered languages come to consider their own language backward and impractical. Such negative views are often directly related to the socio-economic pressure of a dominant speech community. Other speakers of endangered languages, however, attempt to directly counter these threats to their language, and commit themselves to language stabilization and revitalization activities. These communities may establish environments such as day care centres, schools, or at least classes in which their languages are exclusively spoken.

In the end, it is the speakers, not outsiders, who maintain or abandon languages. Still, if communities ask for support to reinforce their threatened languages, language specialists should make their skills available and work with these ethnolinguistic minorities.

External Specialists and Speech Communities

External language specialists, primarily linguists, educators and activists, see their first task as documentation. This includes the collection, annotation and analysis of data concerning endangered languages. The second task entails their active participation in educational programmes. Speakers increasingly demand control over the terms and conditions that govern research; furthermore, they claim rights to the outcomes and future uses of the research.

Increasing numbers of people in ethnolinguistic minorities also make demands on research: first, they demand control over the terms and conditions that govern research;

second, they claim rights to the outcomes and future uses of the research. They want, for example, the right to informed consent and to veto power; they want to know how results will benefit them; and they want to be able to determine how research results will be disseminated. And, above all, they want an equal relationship with outside researchers and want to be actors in a process that is theirs, not someone else's.

What Can be Done?

Just as speech community members react differently to language endangerment, so do linguists, educators and activists to requests for assistance by speech communities. Such requests relate mainly to five essential areas for sustaining endangered languages:

1. Basic linguistic and pedagogical training: providing language teachers with training in basic linguistics, language teaching methods and techniques, curriculum development, and teaching materials development.
2. Sustainable development in literacy and local documentation skills: training local language workers to develop orthographies if needed, and to read, write and analyse their own languages, and produce pedagogical materials. One of the effective strategies here is the establishment of local research centres, where speakers of endangered languages will be trained to study, document and archive their own language materials. Literacy is useful to the teaching and learning of such languages.
3. Supporting and developing national language policy: national language policies must support linguistic diversity, including endangered languages. More social scientists and humanists, and speakers of endangered languages themselves should be actively involved in the formulation of national language policies.
4. Supporting and developing educational policy: in the educational sector of UNESCO, a number of specialists were engaged in implementing increasingly popular mother-tongue education programmes. Since 1953, and especially in the past fifteen years, UNESCO has been instrumental in this development through its policy statements. So-called mother-tongue education, however, often does not refer to education in the ancestral languages of ethnolinguistic minorities (that is, endangered languages), but rather to the teaching of these languages as school subjects. The most common educational model for teaching ethnolinguistic minority children in schools still uses locally or nationally dominant languages as the medium of instruction. Teaching exclusively in these languages supports their spread, at the expense of endangered languages. For example, fewer than 10 per cent of the approximately 2,000 African languages are currently used in teaching, and none of these is an endangered language. We favour the inclusion of regional languages (often called 'mother tongues') in formal education, but not at the expense of ethnolinguistic minorities (*The Hague Recommendations on the Educational Rights of National Minorities*, 1996-97, Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). A great deal of research shows that acquiring bilingual capability need in no way diminish competence in the official language.
5. Improving living conditions and respect for the human rights of speaker communities: language documenters, although not directly involved in economic and social development, can help governments identify overlooked populations. For example, national HIV/AIDS awareness or poverty-alleviation programmes often do not consider

minority communities, especially if they are illiterate. Linguists and educators can be vital mediators by supporting the communities in formulating claims about their linguistic and other human rights. Conversely, materials such as those on health care, community development or language education produced for these marginalized communities require specialist input. Concepts and content need to be conveyed in a culturally meaningful way.

Linguistic Diversity and Ecodiversity

Among the 900 ecoregions of the world that WWF has mapped out, 238 (referred to as Global 200 Ecoregions) are found to be of the utmost importance for the maintenance of the world's ecological viability. Within these Global 200 Ecoregions, we find a vast number of ethnolinguistic groups. These are peoples who have accumulated rich ecological knowledge in their long history of living in their environment.

Conservation biology needs to be paralleled by conservation linguistics. Researchers are exploring not just the parallels, but the links between the world's biodiversity and linguistic/cultural diversity, as well as the causes and consequences of diversity loss at all levels. This connection is significant in itself, because it suggests that the diversity of life is made up of diversity in nature, culture and language. This has been called 'biocultural diversity' by Luisa Maffi; and Michael Krauss has introduced the term 'logosphere' to describe the web linking the world's languages (analogous to 'biosphere', the web linking the world's ecosystems; Maffi, Krauss and Yamamoto, 2001, p. 74).

Salvage Documentation

A language that can no longer be maintained, perpetuated or revitalized still merits the most complete documentation possible. This is because each language embodies unique cultural and ecological knowledge. Documentation of such a language is important for several reasons: 1) it enriches the intellectual capital; 2) it presents a cultural perspective that may be new to our current knowledge; and 3) the process of documentation often helps the language resource person to reactivate the linguistic and cultural knowledge.

Assessing Language Endangerment and Urgency for Documentation

A Caveat

Language communities are complex and diverse; even assessing the number of speakers of a language is difficult. We identify six factors to evaluate a language's vitality and state of endangerment, two further factors to assess language attitudes, and one additional factor to evaluate the urgency of documentation. Taken together, these nine factors are useful for characterizing a language's overall sociolinguistic situation. No single factor alone can be used to assess a language's vitality or its need for documentation.

Language Vitality Assessment: Major Evaluative Factors

There are six major evaluative factors of language vitality, none of which should be used alone. A language that is ranked highly according to one criterion may deserve

immediate and urgent attention on account of other factors. The six factors identified here are: (1) Intergenerational Language Transmission; (2) Absolute Number of Speakers; (3) Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population; (4) Shifts in Domains of Language Use; (5) Response to New Domains and Media, and (6) Materials for Language Education and Literacy.

Factor 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission

The most commonly used factor in evaluating the vitality of a language is whether or not it is being transmitted from one generation to the next (Fishman, 1991). Endangerment can be ranked on a continuum from stability to extinction. Even 'safe', however, does not guarantee language vitality, because at any time speakers may cease to pass on their language to the next generation. Six degrees of endangerment may be distinguished with regard to intergenerational language transmission:

Safe (5): The language is spoken by all generations. The intergenerational transmission of the language is uninterrupted.

Stable yet threatened (5-): The language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission, yet multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant language(s) has usurped certain important communication contexts. Note that such multilingualism alone is not necessarily a threat to languages.

Unsafe (4): Most, but not all, children or families of a particular community speak their parental language as their first language, but this may be restricted to specific social domains (such as the home where children interact with their parents and grandparents).

Definitely endangered (3): The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.

Severely endangered (2): The language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may still understand the language, they typically do not speak it to their children, or among themselves.

Critically endangered (1): The youngest speakers are in the great-grandparental generation, and the language is not used for everyday interactions. These older people often remember only part of the language but do not use it on a regular basis, since there are few people left to speak with.

Extinct (0): There is no one who can speak or remember the language.

| Degree of Endangerment | Grade | Speaker Population |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--|
| <i>Safe</i> | 5 | The language is used by all age groups, including children. |
| <i>Unsafe</i> | 4 | The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains. |

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|------------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Definitely endangered</i> | 3 | The language is used mostly by the parental generation and upwards. |
| <i>Severely endangered</i> | 2 | The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and upwards. |
| <i>Critically endangered</i> | 1 | The language is known to very few speakers, of great-grandparental generation. |
| <i>Extinct</i> | 0 | There is no speaker left. |

Factor 2. Absolute Number of Speakers

A small speech community is always at risk. A small population is much more vulnerable to decimation (by disease, warfare, or natural disaster, for example) than a larger one. A small language group may also easily merge with a neighbouring group, giving up its own language and culture.

Factor 3. Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

The number of speakers of the ancestral language in relation to the total population of an ethno-linguistic group is a significant indicator of language vitality. The following scale can be used to appraise degrees of endangerment.

| Degree of Endangerment | Grade | Proportion of Speakers within the Total Reference Population |
|-------------------------------|--------------|---|
| <i>Safe</i> | 5 | All speak the language. |
| <i>Unsafe</i> | 4 | Nearly all speak the language. |
| <i>Definitely endangered</i> | 3 | A majority speak the language. |
| <i>Severely endangered</i> | 2 | A minority speak the language. |
| <i>Critically endangered</i> | 1 | Very few speak the language. |
| <i>Extinct</i> | 0 | None speak the language. |

Factor 4. Shifts in Domains of Language Use

Where and with whom a language is used and the range of topics speakers can address by using the language has a direct effect on the transmission to the next generation. The following degrees of endangerment can be identified:

Universal use (5): The language of the ethnolinguistic group is actively used in all discourse domains for all purposes.

Multilingual parity (4): One or more dominant languages, rather than the language of the ethnolinguistic group, is/are the primary language(s) in most official domains: government, public offices, and educational institutions. The language in question, however, may well continue to be integral to a number of public domains, especially in traditional religious institutions or practices, local stores, and places where members of the community socialize. The coexistence of the dominant and non-dominant languages results in speakers using each language for different functions (*diglossia*), whereby the non-dominant language is used in informal and home contexts and the dominant language is used in official and public contexts. Speakers may consider the dominant language to be the language of social and economic opportunity. However, older members of the community may continue to use only their ancestral language. Note that multilingualism, common throughout the world, does not necessarily lead to language loss.

Dwindling domains (3): The non-dominant language loses ground and, at home, parents begin to use the dominant language in their everyday interactions with their children; children become 'semi-speakers' of their own language ('receptive bilinguals'). Parents and older members of the community tend to be productively bilingual in the dominant and the indigenous language: they understand and speak both. Bilingual children may be found in families where the indigenous language is actively used.

Limited or formal domains (2): The ancestral language may still be used at community centres, at festivals and at ceremonial occasions where older members of the community have a chance to meet. The limited domain may also include homes where grandparents and other older extended family members reside. Many people can understand the language but cannot speak it.

Highly limited domains (1): The ancestral language is used in very restricted domains on special occasions, usually by very few individuals: for example, by ritual leaders on ceremonial occasions. Some other individuals may remember at least some of the language ('rememberers').

Extinct (0): The language is not spoken at any place at any time.

| Degree of Endangerment | Grade | Domains and Functions |
|-------------------------------|--------------|---|
| <i>Universal use</i> | 5 | The language is used in all domains and for all functions. |
| <i>Multilingual parity</i> | 4 | Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions; the ancestral language usually is rare in the public domain. |
| <i>Dwindling domains</i> | 3 | The ancestral language is used in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate home domains. |

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|----------------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Limited or formal domains</i> | 2 | The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions. |
| <i>Highly limited domains</i> | 1 | The language is used only in very restricted domains and for a very few functions |
| <i>Extinct</i> | 0 | The language is not used in any domain at all. |

Note that multilingualism is a fact of life in most areas of the world. Speakers do *not* have to be monolingual for their language to be vital. It is crucial that the indigenous language serve a meaningful function in culturally important domains.

Factor 5: Response to New Domains and Media

New areas for language use may emerge as community living conditions change. While some language communities do succeed in expanding their own language into the new domain, most do not. Schools, new work environments, new media, including broadcast media and the Internet, usually serve only to expand the scope and power of dominant languages at the expense of all other languages. Although no existing domains of the endangered language may be lost, the use of the dominant language in the new domain has mesmerizing power, as with television. If the traditional language of a community does not meet the challenges of modernity, it becomes increasingly irrelevant and stigmatized. Degrees of endangerment in this respect are given in the following chart.

| Degree of Endangerment | Grade | New Domains and Media Accepted by the Endangered Language |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--|
| <i>Dynamic</i> | 5 | The language is used in all new domains. |
| <i>Robust/active</i> | 4 | The language is used in most new domains. |
| <i>Receptive</i> | 3 | The language is used in many domains. |
| <i>Coping</i> | 2 | The language is used in some new domains. |
| <i>Minimal</i> | 1 | The language is used in only a few new domains. |
| <i>Inactive</i> | 0 | The language is not used in any new domains. |

In education, assigning criteria can be based on two dimensions: up to what level, and how broadly across the curriculum, the endangered language is used. An endangered language which is the medium of instruction for all courses and at all levels will rank much higher than an endangered language that is taught for only one hour per week.

All new domains, be they in employment, education, or the media, must be considered together when assessing an endangered language community's response.

Factor 6: Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Education in the language is essential for language vitality. There are language communities that in spite of strong oral traditions do not wish their language to be written. In other communities, literacy is a source of pride. In general, however, literacy is directly linked with social and economic development. Books and materials are needed on all topics and for various age groups and language levels.

| Grade | Accessibility of Written Materials |
|--------------|--|
| 5 | There is an established orthography and literacy tradition with fiction and non-fiction and everyday media. The language is used in administration and education. |
| 4 | Written materials exist and at school children are developing literacy in the language. The language is not used in written form in the administration. |
| 3 | Written materials exist and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media. |
| 2 | Written materials exist but they may be useful only for some members of the community; for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum. |
| 1 | A practical orthography is known to the community and some material is being written. |
| 0 | No orthography is available to the community. |

Language Attitudes and Policies

The maintenance, promotion or abandonment of non-dominant languages may be dictated by the dominant linguistic culture, be it regional or national. The linguistic policies of a state may inspire linguistic minorities to mobilize their populations towards the maintenance of their languages, or may force them to abandon them. These linguistic attitudes can be a powerful force both for promotion and loss of their languages.

Members of the dominant culture shape the ideological environment, often propagating a value system in which their own language is seen as a positive asset, and believed to be a unifying symbol for the region or state. When several larger linguistic communities compete for the same political or social space, they may each have their own conflicting linguistic attitudes. This leads to the general perception that a great vari-

ety of languages causes divisiveness and poses a threat to national unity. The fostering of a single dominant language is one attempt to deal with this real – or merely perceived – threat. In so doing, the governing body may legislate the use of language. Accordingly, the policies may discourage or even prohibit the use of other languages. National policy, including the lack of overt policy, has in any case a direct impact on the language attitude of the community itself.

Language Attitude Assessment

The two factors for assessing language attitudes and policies concerning both dominant and non-dominant languages are: (7) Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, including Official Status and Use, and (8) Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language.

Factor 7: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, including Official Status and Use

A country may have an explicit policy for its great variety of languages. At one extreme, one language may be designated as the sole official language of the country, while all others are neglected. At the other extreme, all languages of a State may receive equal official status. Equal legal status, however, does not guarantee language maintenance or long-term vitality of a language. Official support of dominant and non-dominant languages may be ranked according to the following scale:

Equal support (5): All of a country's languages are valued as assets. All languages are protected by law, and the government encourages the maintenance of all languages by implementing explicit policies.

Differentiated support (4): Non-dominant languages are explicitly protected by the government, but there are clear differences in the contexts in which the dominant/official language(s) and non-dominant (protected) language(s) are used. The government encourages ethnolinguistic groups to maintain and use their languages, most often in private domains rather than in public domains. Some of the domains of non-dominant language use enjoy high prestige (for example, ceremonial occasions).

Passive assimilation (3): The central authorities are indifferent as to whether or not minority languages are spoken, as long as the dominant language is the language of interaction in public space. The dominant group's language is de facto the official language. The non-dominant languages do not enjoy high prestige.

Active assimilation (2): The government encourages minority groups to abandon their own languages by providing education for the minority group members in the dominant language only. Speaking and/or writing non-dominant languages is not encouraged.

Forced assimilation (1): The government has an explicit language policy supporting the dominant language while the non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor supported.

Prohibition (0): Minority languages are prohibited from use in any domain. Languages may be tolerated in private domains.

| Degree of Support | Grade | Official Attitudes towards Language |
|-------------------------------|--------------|--|
| <i>Equal support</i> | 5 | All languages are protected. |
| <i>Differentiated support</i> | 4 | Non-dominant languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domain. The use of the non-dominant language is prestigious. |
| <i>Passive assimilation</i> | 3 | No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain. |
| <i>Active assimilation</i> | 2 | Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages. |
| <i>Forced assimilation</i> | 1 | The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor protected. |
| <i>Prohibition</i> | 0 | Minority languages are prohibited. |

Factor 8: Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language

Members of a speech community are not usually neutral towards their own language. They may see it as essential to their community and identity and promote it; they may use it without promoting it; they may be ashamed of it and, therefore, not promote it; or they may see it as a nuisance and actively avoid using it.

When members' attitudes towards their language are very positive, the language may be seen as a key symbol of group identity. Just as people value family traditions, festivals and community events, members of the community may see their language as a cultural core value, vital to their community and ethnic identity. If members view their language as a hindrance to economic mobility and integration into mainstream society, they may develop negative attitudes towards it. Attitudes of community members towards their own language may be assessed on the following scale.

| Grade | Community Members' Attitudes towards Language |
|--------------|---|
| 5 | All members value their language and wish to see it promoted. |
| 4 | Most members support language maintenance. |

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| 3 | Many members support language maintenance; many others are indifferent or may even support language shift. |
| 2 | Some members support language maintenance; some are indifferent or may even support language shift. |
| 1 | Only a few members support language maintenance; many are indifferent or support language shift. |
| 0 | No one cares if the language is given up; all prefer to use a dominant language. |

Language Attitudes and Policies: Interaction and Social Effects

Attitudes towards language, be they positive, indifferent, or negative, interact with governmental policy and societal pressures to result in increased or decreased language use in different domains.

In many cases, community members abandon their language because they believe they have no alternative, or because they do not have enough knowledge about the long-term consequences of the ‘choices’ they make. People in such a situation have often been presented with an either-or choice (‘either you cling to your mother tongue and identity but don’t get a job’, or ‘you leave your language and have better chances in life’). In fact, maintaining and using both languages will allow even better chances in life.

When languages have an unequal power relationship, members of the non-dominant group usually speak both their native language and the dominant language, whereas the speakers of the dominant group are often monolingual. Speakers may gradually come to use only the dominant language. On the other hand, the subordinate group may resist linguistic domination and mobilize its members to revitalize or fortify their language. Strategies for such linguistic activism must be tailored to the particular socio-linguistic situation, which generally is one of three types:

- Language Revival: reintroducing a language that has been in limited use for some time, such as Hebrew after the creation of the state of Israel, or Gaelic in Ireland;
- Language Fortification: increasing the presence of the non-dominant language to counterbalance a perceived threat of a dominant language, such as Welsh;
- Language Maintenance: supporting the stable use, in speaking and in writing (where orthographies exist), of the non-dominant language in a region or state with both multilingualism and a dominant language (lingua franca), such as Maori in New Zealand.

For language vitality, speakers ideally not only strongly value their language, but they also know in which social domains their language is to be supported. A positive attitude is critical for the long-term stability of a language.

Documentation Urgency Assessment

As a guide for assessing the urgency of documenting a language, the type and quality of existing language materials must be identified. This constitutes the final factor in the assessment of language endangerment.

Factor 9: Type and Quality of Documentation

Of central importance are written texts, including transcribed, translated and annotated audiovisual recordings of natural speech. Such information is important in helping members of the language community to formulate specific tasks, and enables linguists to design research projects in collaboration with members of the language community.

| Nature of Documentation | Grade | Language Documentation |
|--------------------------------|--------------|---|
| <i>Superlative</i> | 5 | There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts and a constant flow of language materials. Abundant annotated high-quality audio and video recordings exist. |
| <i>Good</i> | 4 | There is at least one good grammar, a few dictionaries, texts, literature, and everyday media; adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings. |
| <i>Fair</i> | 3 | There may be an adequate grammar, some dictionaries, and texts, but no everyday media; audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality or degree of annotation. |
| <i>Fragmentary</i> | 2 | There are some grammatical sketches, wordlists, and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings may exist in varying quality, with or without any annotation. |
| <i>Inadequate</i> | 1 | Only a few grammatical sketches, short wordlists, and fragmentary texts exist. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable quality, or are completely unannotated. |
| <i>Undocumented</i> | 0 | No material exists. |

Language Vitality Index: Evaluating the Significance of Factors

This section describes how the above nine factors may be used. Taken together, the scales are a useful instrument for assessing the state of a community's language and the type of support needed for its maintenance, revitalization, perpetuation, and documentation.

The vitality of languages varies widely depending on the different situations of speech communities. The needs for documentation also differ under varying conditions. Languages cannot be assessed simply by adding the numbers above; we therefore discourage the use of simple addition. Instead, the language vitality factors given above may be examined according to the purpose of the assessment.

The descriptions given above are offered as guidelines only. Each user should adapt these guidelines to the local context and to the specific purpose sought.

Example 1. Self-Assessment by a Speech Community

A speech community may examine these factors first to assess their language situation and to determine whether action is needed, and if so, what to do first. For this purpose, although all factors are important, the first six are especially useful. The community may find that the language is mostly being spoken by grandparents and the older generation so their language could be characterized as "severely endangered" (Grade 2) with regard to Factor 1 "Intergenerational Language Transmission." In addition, the community may find that the language is used mainly on ceremonial occasions and at community festivals. In terms of Factor 4 "Shifts in Domains of Language Use" then, the language use can be assessed at the level of "limited or formal domains" (Grade 2). On the other hand, the community may find that "most members of the community support language maintenance" (Grade 4, Factor 8 "Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language"). At this point, the community members may conclude that their language is in extreme danger of being lost in a short period of time if nothing is done about the situation. They have also found that the community people are very much interested in reversing language shift and have expressed their support for language revitalization efforts. Once the community considers the full range of factors and completes its self-assessment, it will have a well-founded basis on which to seek support from relevant agencies.

Example 2. External Evaluation

The guidelines could also be utilized as a policy tool by more or less official institutions concerned with language maintenance, revitalization, literacy development, or documentation.

When more than one language is being considered, each of the above factors may become an important point of comparison. The result of such comparison has a wide range of possibilities for fortifying language diversity in a particular region: it may be useful in ranking the severity of language endangerment for the purpose of support; in educating the public on the importance of language diversity; in formulating a language policy for the purpose of maintaining language diversity; in mobilizing language special-

ists to counter the language shift; or in alerting the national and international organizations of the diminishing human intellectual resources (see Appendix 1 for an example of comparison of languages in Venezuela).

Concluding Remarks

The world faces new challenges in maintaining linguistic diversity. It is time for the peoples of the world to pool their resources at all levels and build on the strengths of their linguistic and cultural diversity.

At the local community level and over the past several decades, for example, many people have been working to develop language education programs, usually with extremely limited technical resources. Unlike teachers of major languages of the world, they lack not only formal training in language teaching, now often required by local governments, but also language curricula and, even more crucially, usable basic language descriptions. These language teachers require a variety of skills: pedagogical (e.g. curriculum and materials development, language teaching techniques and methods); sociolinguistic (e.g. analysis of ongoing language contact processes, of past and present ancestral language functions); and purely linguistic (e.g. data collection, analysis, and description).

Similarly, linguists, language activists, and policy makers have a long-term task to compile and disseminate the most effective and viable mechanisms for sustaining and revitalizing the world's endangered languages. Most importantly, they have the responsibility of working collaboratively with endangered language communities that enjoy an equal partnership in the projects.

We all share the responsibility of ensuring that no languages will disappear against the will of the community concerned and that as many languages as possible will be maintained and transmitted to the future generations. The reason why we must fortify the diversity of language is captured in the following way by a Navajo elder:

If you don't breathe,
there is no air.

If you don't walk,
there is no earth.

If you don't speak,
there is no world.

(Paraphrased by Akira Yamamoto from a Navajo elder's words, PBS-TV Millennium Series, *Tribal Wisdom and the Modern World*, hosted by David Maybury-Lewis, aired on 24 May, 1992)

Appendix 1: An Example of Language Vitality Assessment from Venezuela (prepared by María E. Villalón)

In this document nine factors have been proposed to assess language vitality. These can be applied simultaneously to several languages in order to obtain a comparative picture of their relative strength, appraise their contrasting sociolinguistic situation, and to establish priorities for action. The following example illustrates the comparative application of the factors across three indigenous languages of Venezuela, a country that recognizes and protects its minority languages. Mapoyo is a Cariban language no longer spontaneously spoken, but remembered by a handful of elders in a multi-ethnic community all of whose members communicate in Spanish, which is also the first language learned by all the Mapoyo children. Kari'ña is a Cariban language as well, but has many more speakers, most of whom are bilingual. Some elders learned Kari'ña as their first language and can speak it fluently, although nowadays Spanish is the preferred language of communication for most Kari'ña, numbering over 8,000. Saníma, related to Yanomamí, has over two thousand speakers, yet very few of them are bilingual in the dominant Spanish language.

The “number of speakers” in the table below refers to the number of fully competent speakers. In the case of Kari'ña and Saníma the figures given are but estimates, for no recent reliable statistics are available. The Mapoyo figures are more precise, and based on relatively recent fieldwork⁵. They are placed in parentheses to indicate that they quantify “rememberers” rather than speakers. With regards to “Materials for Language Education and Literacy,” I have given Mapoyo a 1, because a practical orthography has been developed for the first time, and will be presented shortly to the community, along with audiovisual learning materials⁶. Finally, although Venezuelan Saníma is basically undocumented, unannotated recordings of varying quality exist, as well as a grammatical sketch of the closely related and better-documented Brazilian variety⁷. Thus, it may be ranked as a 1 on “Amount and Quality of Documentation.”

**Estimated Degree of Endangerment and Urgency for Documentation:
The Case of Three Venezuelan Indigenous Languages**

| Factors | Languages | | |
|--|------------------|---------|--------|
| | Mapoyo | Kari'ña | Sanjma |
| Intergenerational Language Transmission | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| Absolute Number of Speakers | (7) | 650 | 2500 |
| Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Shifts in Domains of Language Use | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| Response to New Domains and Media | 0 | 1 | --- |
| Materials for Language Education and Literacy | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| Governmental & Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies including Official Status & Use | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Amount and Quality of Documentation | 1 | 3 | 1 |

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Notes

¹ The introductory pages of this text are from the pens of Arienne Dwyer, Matthias Brenzinger and Akir Y. Yamamoto.

² Throughout this document, the term ‘language’ includes sign languages, and ‘speech’ or ‘endangered language communities’ also refer to sign language communities.

³ See below the article by Miyaoka on the Pacific Rim project.

⁴ cf. www.unesco.org/culture/heritage/intangible/meetings/paris_march2003.shtml#_ftn2

⁵ Villalón, M. E.; T. Granadillo. Los marcadores de Persona de la Lengua Mapoyo. In: H. van der Voort and S. van de Kerke (eds.), *Indigenous Languages of Lowland South America*. CNWS Publications, 90, (ILLA) Vol. 1. Leiden, Leiden University, 2000, 197-211.

⁶ Villalón, M. E. *Registro y Documentación de las Lenguas Indígenas Mapoyo y Kari’ña del Estado Bolívar. Parte I. Mapoyo*. Caracas, Instituto del Patrimonio Cultural, 1999.

⁷ Borgman, D. M.; Sanuma. In: D. C. Derbyshire and G. K. Pullum (eds.), *Handbook of Amazonian Languages, Vol. 2*. New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 1990, 16-248.

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