

Saving the Manchu language: 9 critically endangered languages from around the world

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The Manchus ruled China for nearly three centuries but its language is now in danger of dying out. Only a handful of native Manchu speakers are left in two places in China.

There are now steps being taken to save the language from extinction, but Manchu is just one of the many languages which have been classified as "critically endangered" by the United Nations' cultural organisation (Unesco).

According to Unesco, half of more than 6,000 languages all over the world face the imminent threat of extinction.

Here are nine of the most endangered languages.

1. Manchu, China



A student holding a book during a class at the Sanjiazi Manchu school on May 4, 2016. PHOTO: AFP

This is the native language of the Manchus, who hail originally from the region between China and the Korean peninsula. In the 1600s, they established the Qing Dynasty after invading China.

The language of the conquerors became the official language used in court and bureaucracy.

However, after the dynasty was overthrown in 1911 and the Manchus were chased out to their ancestral homeland in the Changbai mountains, the language began to decline.

Today, only 20 people speak this rare language - 10 can be found in Sanjazi village and the other 10 reside in Dawujia village in China, according to the Unesco's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. Most of the estimated 10 million Manchus living in north-eastern China now speak Mandarin.

The Manchu alphabet, written in vertical columns running from top to bottom and read from left to right, is based on the Mongolian alphabet.

2. Ayapaneco, Mexico

[How to save a near-extinct language #First](#)

The Ayapaneco language has been used in Mexico for centuries and dates back to the ancient Mayans.

According to a 2011 report in the English paper The Guardian, Ayapaneco faces the biggest threat of extinction out of the 68 indigenous languages in Mexico.

As of 2011, there were only two people left in the Mexican village of Ayapa who could speak this language fluently. To make matters worse, these last two speakers - Manuel Segovia, 75, and Isidro Velazquez, 69 - had quarrelled and were not talking to each other.

The Guardian reported that Daniel Suslak, a linguistic anthropologist from Indiana University, as saying of the duo: "They don't have a lot in common. "

Mr Suslak - who had been creating an Ayapaneco dictionary - added that "the language is particularly rich" in what he calls, "sound symbolic expressions that often take their inspiration from nature, such as kolo-golo-nay, translated as "to gobble like a turkey".

Ayapaneco, like many other indigenous languages in Mexico, was a victim of the prevalence of Spanish as the lingua franca post colonisation. The name of the language is not native to its speakers, who actually call it Nuumte Oote, which means the True Voice.

3. Ter Sami, Russia

Like Ayapaneco, there are only two speakers of Ter Sami left, according to a 2010 report by newspaper Barents Observer. The report said the last two elderly speakers of the language live in the Kola peninsula, located in the north-west of Russia.

Although the number of ethnic Ter Sami residing in the area was estimated to number 100, most of them speak Russian.

According to The Guardian, at the end of the 19th century, 450 speakers still remained. But the Soviet collectivisation in the 1930s took its toll on ethnic peoples and languages as ethnic dialects were forbidden and only Russian taught in schools.

The Sami people are indigenous to northern Europe and were traditionally a nomadic people who herded reindeer. Spread across modern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, they speak nine closely related languages.

4. Gottscheerisch, Slovenia

[Gottscheerisch spoken at the Gottscheer Kulturwoche 2010](#)

Spoken by Gottschee Germans, the Gottscheerisch language is described as a German dialect by the official website of the Gottscheer Relief Association, New York.

Founder and executive director of the Endangered Language Alliance Daniel Kaufman explained to BBC News in Dec 2012: "There are these communities that are completely gone in their homeland. One of them, the

Gottscheers, is a community of Germanic people who were living in Slovenia, and they were isolated from the rest of the Germanic populations.

"They were surrounded by Slavic speakers for several hundreds of years so they really have their own variety (of language) which is now unintelligible to other German speakers."

According to the Gottscheer Relief Association website, thousands of Gottscheers travelled to America in the late 1800s. The New York Times reported in June that the remaining speakers of this historical German language now reside in Queens, New York.

5. Ainu, Japan

[WIKITONGUES: Teruyo speaking Ainu](#)

The Ainu people are indigenous to the Japanese island of Hokkaido, and there is a theory that they are descended from the Jomon-jin, the oldest known civilisation in Japan which dates back to 14,500 BC.

For centuries, the Ainu were ignored or discriminated against by the Japanese, as a result of which the Ainu language and culture almost went extinct. They were a hunter-gatherer people who live off the land.

Official government recognition of the Ainu as Japan's indigenous people came only in 2008.

In an interview with radio station Public Radio International in May, Russian linguist Anna Bugaeva said that she "hopes that this renewed interest in Ainu culture will encourage younger Ainu to learn the language, which hasn't been spoken conversationally since the 1950s".

Unesco's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger stated that only 15 people speak the language.

6. Judeo-Median language varieties, Central Iran

According to the official website of the Endangered Language Alliance, scholars classify the different varieties of the languages spoken by the Jews of Iran under the common heading "Judeo-Median".

There are five Judeo-Median language varieties: Judeo-Isfahani, Judeo-Yazdi, Judeo-Kermani, Judeo-Hamadani, and Judeo-Kashani. All of them originated from the northwest-central area of Iran, which was traditionally called Media.

On the Endangered Language Alliance website, researcher Habib Borjian said that most Iranian Jews left their homeland by 1970 and now reside in other countries such as the United States and Israel.

7. Chemehuevi, United States

[The Last Speakers: Endangered Languages](#)

The Chemehuevi tribe live in the Great Basin region, better known to most people as the Mojave desert, of the United States. There are only three speakers left.

In an effort to preserve this historical tribal language, a language academy known as Siwavaats Junior College was established to teach the tribe's youth.

On the official website of the Chemehuevi Indian Tribe, Chemehuevi Tribal Council Member June Leivas said that the language is relatively challenging to learn as it has no rhythm and several words such as "please" and "thank you" are not part of its vocabulary.

8. Dumi, Nepal

Dumi is a language with only eight speakers in 2007, as stated by the Unesco's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. According to the atlas, the Dumi language is used in the mountainous Khotang District of Nepal.

Website Ethnologue also stated that not many parents teach Dumi to their children, thus leading to the declining use of this language.

Scholars have documented the language, spoken by the Dumi people, in grammars, a dictionary as well as in research papers.

9. Dusner, Indonesia

This extremely rare language originated from the Indonesian village of Dusner and only has three speakers left as of 2011.

Daily Mail Online reported that in April 2011, linguists from Oxford University headed to this village to save this language before it disappeared forever. Their visit was prompted by the fact that one of the last speakers of the language was killed in a flood and the last speaker had a close shave when the volcanic Mount Merapi, located near her home village, erupted.

Sources: Unesco Atlas, The Guardian, Barents Observer , official website of the Gottscheer Relief Association, New York, BBC News, The New York Times, Public Radio International, official website of the Endangered Language Alliance, official website of the Chemehuevi Indian Tribe, Ethnologue, Daily Mail Online,