



## Protecting Languages and Preserving Cultures

*ODU Model United Nations Society*

### Introduction: When and How?

Of some 6,500 to 7,000 languages and major dialects spoken world-wide, roughly 2,700 are in danger of disappearing completely as their few remaining speakers die. With each loss, the entire world loses. Every language offers a unique way of understanding social affairs and humanity's relationship with the universe, making the death of language a loss for all the world's peoples. Only when a language and culture are officially recognized and promoted, moreover, can their speakers fully join their larger communities. Promoting dying languages then becomes essential to assuring the rights of marginalized groups, their social equality and inclusion.<sup>1</sup>

Agreeing on the promotion of indigenous languages and cultures is easy in the abstract. However, there are harsh problems to be overcome before progress becomes possible. For some countries, the 'whether' question remains lively. Many countries have an official 'leading' or dominant culture; residents are expected to use one language in public especially. Often the law forbids the use of other languages in education, publication, or the media, sometimes it is illegal even in private settings. Many

countries have a political movement to make one language, typically the language of the dominant group, the country's only legal language. To their advocates, a single legal language is a way to preserve power and their vision of society.<sup>2</sup>



2019 | INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF  
**Indigenous Languages**

Greater recognition for previously repressed or marginalized ethnic groups can be seen as a threat to national unification. This outlook is especially common in countries that only recently unified, whose borders are weak or contested, and where loyalty to groups—ethnic, religious, tribal or regional—is stronger than loyalty to the state. But pressure to de-nationalize minority languages and cultures is increasingly found even in wealthy countries like China, Germany and the United States

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<sup>1</sup> Harbeck, James. 'Why do we fight so hard to preserve endangered languages?' *The Week*, 2 March 2015, <https://theweek.com/articles/541609/fight-hard-preserve-endangeredlanguages> ;

Newnum, Graham . 'Why Language Preservation Matters (According to Experts)', *Cyacom*, 28 August 2018, <http://blog.cyacom.com/why-language-preservation-matters-according-to-experts>

<sup>2</sup> Brice, Brandon, 'Why English should be the official language of the United States', *Washington Times*, 31 December 2014, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/dec/31/why-english-should-be-official-language-united-sta/> ; Hulse, Carl, 'Senate votes to set English as national language', *New York Times*, 19 May 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/19/washington/19immig.html>



There is widespread acceptance of the most liberal goals of language and culture preservation, recognizing the full breadth of human experience and helping marginalized groups from being completely absorbed by larger groups, enriching knowledge and respect for our fellow man. But there is less agreement about the obligations of states for how best to implement such policies.

Above all, for many countries, the essential question of policies to protect languages and preserve cultures is who pays? For example, creating parallel educational systems and guaranteeing transactions in official institutions like the courts and hospitals, costs money. If private business and religious institutions are expected to do the same, costs rise even faster.

But a more fundamental problem often is how recognition affects domestic political power. And in many states, therein lies the fundamental political objections to measures that might disrupt ethnic-political power balances, potentially challenging the authority and privileges of particular groups. The issue is especially sensitive where it takes on political dimensions. In such situations, recognizing a language is not politically neutral.

And the effects of ending repression or marginalization can be unpredictable or even dangerous. In countries with delicate ethnic balances, such as much of Africa, but also Southeast Asia, privileging particular languages can be tantamount to political power-sharing, as previously marginalized groups—denied a role in government or political power—are acknowledged as political equals. Under such circumstances, forcing recognition of a language can directly affect domestic power balances, possibly leading to conflict and violence. Recognition can be denied and fought by ethnic

and language groups in power, and sometimes they will fight to ensure equal language rights are denied to their opponents.

Governments facing such difficulties typically relied for years on the power of one linguistic group and repressed others. For them, sharing linguistic recognition is tantamount to losing power. It means not only granting widespread use of a different language, but also allowing its speakers to compete for political power. Such governments can be expected to be hesitant to support reforms of the kind UNESCO is considering here. They may accept such reforms in principle, but deny them in practice. Above all, they can be expected to insist that application of such reforms be left entirely to their own domestic governments.

## The Scale of the Problem

Today, the top ten languages in the world are the primary dialects of half the world's population. Can language diversity be preserved, or are we on a path to becoming a monolingual species? Over the past century alone, around 400 languages – about one every three months – have gone extinct, and most linguists estimate that 50 percent of the world's remaining 6,500 to 7,000 languages will be gone by the end of this century. Some anthropologists and linguists believe the loss could be closer to 90 percent. Since there are so many imperiled languages, it is impossible to label just one as the rarest or most endangered, but at least 100 around the world have only a handful of speakers – from Ainu in Japan to Yagan in Chile. UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* lists 576 as critically endangered, with thousands more categorized as endangered or threatened. The highest numbers occur in the Americas.<sup>3</sup>

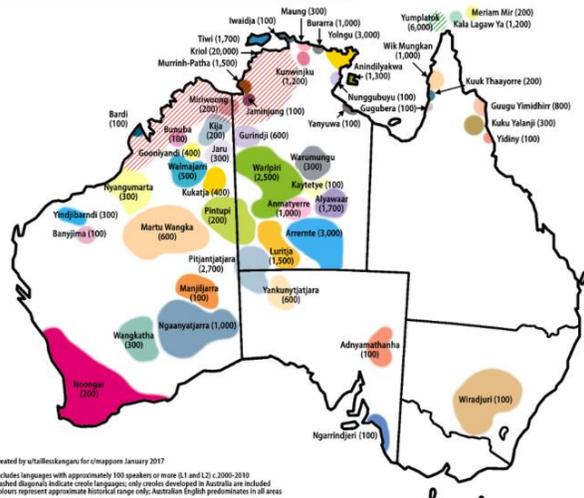
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<sup>3</sup> Nuwer, Rachel. 'Languages: why we must save dying tongues', *BBC News*, 6 June

2014 <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20140606-why-we-must-save-dying-languages>



Living Indigenous Languages of Australia  
Approximate historical range and estimated number of speakers



Languages usually reach the point of crisis after being displaced by a socially, politically and economically dominant one, as linguists put it. In this scenario, the majority speaks another language – English, Mandarin, Swahili – so speaking that language is key to accessing jobs, education and opportunities. Sometimes, especially in immigrant communities, parents will decide not to teach their children their heritage language, perceiving it as a potential hindrance to their children’s success in life.

Speakers of minority languages have suffered a long history of persecution. Well into the twentieth century, many Native American children in Canada and the United States, for example, were sent to boarding schools, where they were often forbidden to speak their native language. Today, many English-speaking Americans are still hostile towards non-English speakers. Extreme persecution still happens as well. In 2014, a linguist in China was arrested for trying to open schools that taught his native language, Uighur.<sup>4</sup>

Some countries, mostly wealthier states in the global north, are far ahead on protection of

languages. In many countries, such as Switzerland and Nordic States, minority languages have given protected status. Subsidies encourage publications and media use of these languages. Alternative schooling in protected languages also has been made available and non-minority students are encouraged to master them.

### It is a Political Problem

The problems of endangered languages and cultures cannot be separated from politics. Disappearance is closely associated with lack of political rights. Languages and culture decline because people cannot achieve basic goals—like participating in the economy, educating their children, finding health care, or going to court—in their native language. Assimilation with the politically privileged language and culture is essential to getting things done.

The dominant language often belongs to the majority of the population, but not always. In many countries, minority groups dominate politics and make their culture or language the key to getting things done, forcing the majority to adapt to their ways.

Indigenous groups tend to be especially vulnerable to loss of language and culture. They usually are political weak, under-represented in educational institutions, government, media and business. Often systematic policies are responsible for their exclusion. In the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries, it was common for indigenous languages to be legally prohibited, banned from public use, illegal in courts, and forbidden in schools and publication.

While these policies of legal prohibition are declining, the affects often remain. For example, when they are admitted to the corridors of

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



power, members of indigenous groups usually are expected to speak majority languages. So, the fundamental issue is the broader program of the rights of indigenous people and marginalized groups.

Effective solutions to problems of disappearing indigenous and minority languages and cultures often mean extending political rights, which dominant groups may oppose.

## The Role of the UN

Current measures are passive: UN encourages governments to take action, but concentrating on shaping international norms, they do not create strong incentives for governments to reverse their policies of discrimination.

Under the *2019 Year of Indigenous Languages*, UN Member States are encouraged to promote action in five main areas of the UNESCO *Strategy for the Safeguarding of Endangered Languages*:

1. Increasing understanding, reconciliation and international cooperation
2. Creation of favorable conditions for knowledge-sharing and dissemination of good practices about indigenous languages
3. Integration of indigenous languages into standard-settings
4. Empowerment through capacity-building
5. Growth and development through elaboration of new knowledge<sup>5</sup>

Such measures encourage preservation by promoting a normative expectation of linguistic

diversity. But they do not require financial investment in language survival and education, nor do they create financial incentives for governments to act aggressive to slow language disappearance.

Generally, the UN does not pressure governments to become more inclusive toward excluded and marginalized groups, sailing to effectively push for the inclusion of previously repressed people, their languages and cultures, the mainstream of national politics, education and governance. To ensure swift progress, to preserve as many endangered languages as possible, requires stronger measures, but there is sharp disagreement on what those should be.

## Country and Block Positions

**China and Russia:** For countries preoccupied with problems of national unity, like China and Russia, minority rights are a delicate issue. There is widespread interest and often domestic legal commitment, to preserving indigenous languages and cultures, but nationalist governments like China and Russia also expect all residents to be fully functional in the dominant linguistic culture; Mandarin Chinese and Russian, respectively. They support measures to do more to help endangered languages and cultures but insist that policies be strictly voluntary for Member States.

**European Union (EU):** The 28 Member States of the European Union share a consensus on the importance of preserving indigenous and minority languages and cultures. Increasingly, they favor legal protection requirements and support for education in these languages, such as Sami in Northern European countries.<sup>6</sup> In some

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<sup>5</sup> 'International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, 9 August,' *United Nations*, n.d., <http://www.un.org/en/events/indigenousday/>

<sup>6</sup> Henrik, Magga Ole and Skutnabb-Kangas Tove, 'The Saami languages: the present and the future', *Culture Survival*, June 2011, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural>



cases, such as the United Kingdom, they have supported political devolution, or regionalism, allowing regional communities to be self-governing in their local language, such as Welsh in Wales.<sup>7</sup> But Europe still has major language issues to resolve, especially minority languages spread through the country, such as Finnish within Sweden, German speakers in Italy, or Hungarian minorities in Central Europe.<sup>8</sup>



These issues can be sensitive even in Europe, where minority rights like Hungarian speakers can be part of larger issues of nationalism and expanding national influence. What is less controversial for the European Union is support for indigenous and minority languages elsewhere in the world, especially in less developed countries in need of expertise and financial assistance.

**Non-Aligned Movement (NAM):** For the 120 Member States of the UN's largest voting bloc, linguistic legacies are a tricky issue. The NAM strongly support the *Universal Declaration on*

[-survival-quarterly/saami-languages-present-and-future](#)

<sup>7</sup> Pierce Jones, Ann Elisabeth, Tony Coslett and Seán Starks, 'The long struggle for the right to speak the Welsh and Irish languages', *Guardian*, 23 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/23/the-long-struggle-for-the-right-to-speak-the-welsh-and-irish-languages>

*Cultural Diversity and the Strategy for the Safeguarding of Endangered Languages.*

But members for this block are former colonial states which only recently gained independence. For a great many, building national unity is the highest priority. How to reconcile national unity with minority rights is a problem few can solve easily. Many have been accused of suppressing the rights of their minorities, denying linguistic minorities voting rights or political power, insisting that education be in a 'national' language, and suppressing media in non-national languages.

## Proposals for Action

For Member States, it is easiest to agree on *principles*, especially if they are diluted to permit each country to interpret and apply them as they will. Stressing principles is a natural path. What is tougher is finding agreement for more binding commitments. *Active measures* are the great untried area for language preservation reform. Possibilities include:

- **Create financial rewards** for countries that reduce the rate of language disappearance.
- **Establish aid programs** to fund propagation of underutilized languages, in education, media, legal systems and courts, and governance.

<sup>8</sup> Fellman, Fredrika, Liliia Makashova and Viktoriia Zhuhan, 'Sweden's Finns fear minority language rights are under threat', *Guardian*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/13/swedens-finns-fear-minority-language-rights-are-under-threat>



- **Require governments** to give indigenous languages fully equal legal status in education and the courts.
- **Require the minority language be taught as primary or equal languages** in schools so that all students in home regions learn an indigenous or minority language, require all official legal documents, and all court proceedings to be available in dying languages.
- **Require all printed material** to include translation into at least one indigenous or minority language.
- **Require members of majority groups** to be at least partially educated in indigenous or minority languages in schools.
- **Encourage political devolution**, such as regional self-rule, for indigenous and minority peoples.
- **Focus on Israel:** For many Member States, an easy course of action is to focus not on general issues of languages

and cultures, but the specific issues of Israeli treatment of its Arab residents and the rights of people of the Israeli Occupied Palestinian Territories.<sup>9</sup> Criticizing Israel is one area where most Member States often find cooperation and agreement easiest. In this case for failing to elevate Arabic to equal status as Hebrew in its governance. Support is strongest among the Member States of the NAM and especially its Arab Member States. Opposition is most extreme from the United States, which made support for Israel the center of its foreign policy under President Trump. Opposition also comes from the Member States of the European Union, who regard the focus on Israel as a distraction from more ambitious work.

There is a cost to such priorities, since it confirms a bias in the UN that its critics—led by the United States—use to criticize the organization and its work. The preoccupation with Israel was President Trump’s justification for withdrawing the United States from UNESCO in 2018.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> UNESCO Adopts New Resolutions on Palestine’, *IMEMC News*, 11 October 2018, <http://imemc.org/article/unesco-adopts-new-resolutions-on-palestine/>; ‘Newspapers review: UNESCO’s resolutions on Occupied Palestine focus of dailies’, *Wafa*, 11 October 2018,

<http://english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=80FFQ0a105071627694a80FFQ0>

<sup>10</sup> Gardiner Harris and Steven Erlanger, ‘U.S. will withdraw from Unesco, Citing Its ‘Anti-Israel Bias’, *New York Times*, 12 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/12/us/politics/trump-unesco-withdrawal.html>



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