



United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

Addressing the threat of language loss and
promoting language diversity



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Introduction

The diversity of languages has been a fascinating concept for many linguists and researchers ever since evolution brought about homo sapiens. Today there are 7000 languages still in use out of the 8,300 recorded languages. These have come about due to the isolation of smaller groups of homo sapiens, who created their own manner of communicating. However, according to UNESCO, language diversity is under threat, with 33% of languages having fewer than 1000 speakers and 40% being in danger of extinction in 2023. On average, every 14 days a language goes extinct, as its last speaker passes away. It is important for UNESCO to address this issue as a diversity of languages defines where people are from and the community they reside in. This is important for an understanding of a person's origins, culture and knowledge. The threat to language diversity has come about due to globalisation and urbanisation. These factors have led to native speakers becoming more distant from their mother tongues, and in some cases even not learning the language anymore, leading to a language becoming endangered.

Each language can bring a unique perspective to knowledge and the world. Different indigenous languages have the ability to give an understanding of the past, of the nature around us and how to live sustainably in an ever-changing world. Indigenous scriptures that are found may give us an understanding of different technologies and knowledge such as the ancient Hindu scriptures, which helped give the physicist knowledge of how to build the atomic bomb. It is therefore important to protect all languages equally and with equity.

Definition of Key Terms

Globalisation

People become interconnected with other cultures in the world through travel and technological communication. Globalisation causes more dominant languages with more speakers to thrive and overpower less-spoken languages. This can lead to a loss of language diversity as many languages become extinct.

Urbanisation

People moving into larger cities than their origin for better opportunities in terms of work and social connections. It generally has the same effect on languages as globalisation. As people move to more urban areas, they tend to use their indigenous languages less and therefore it becomes more at-risk.

Language

The tool which humans use to communicate with each other, which can be verbal, gestured and written. When the term language is used, it usually describes verbal communication between people in a group.

Language Extinction

The extinction of a language occurs when the last speaker passes away without any other person learning that language. It refers to when a language is not spoken any more. Languages that are extinct may be recorded by text or verbally.

Human Migration

The movement of people internationally with an intention of permanently settling.

Parent Language

A parent language is a language that new languages are derived from. Throughout this research report you will come across Latin, which is the parent language of modern languages such as French, Spanish and Italian.

General Overview

The threat of language loss has become increasingly more prevalent in the past decades. More languages are becoming both endangered and extinct as different languages overpower one another. One important thing to note is the difference between the evolution of a language and the extinction of a language. The evolution of language occurs when it changes over time into different languages, while the extinction of a language is when the last speaker of it dies, without it evolving into another language. An example of this is Latin, which is a parent language and has evolved throughout the years into the five romance languages, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian. Etruscan, an extinct language, was superseded by Latin and ceased to exist afterwards without having a language properly evolve from it. Once a language becomes extinct, it is extremely unlikely that it will be spoken again, especially if it is from a region with a smaller population size

.The loss of languages is what the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is trying to prevent. Throughout history there have been many languages lost. That is part of the natural cycle of humans as they become more intertwined or occupied by another group.

Similarly to the natural change of the climate, it is not possible to prevent all languages from dying out. However, it is the speed at which the languages are dying out which is the issue.

Globalisation

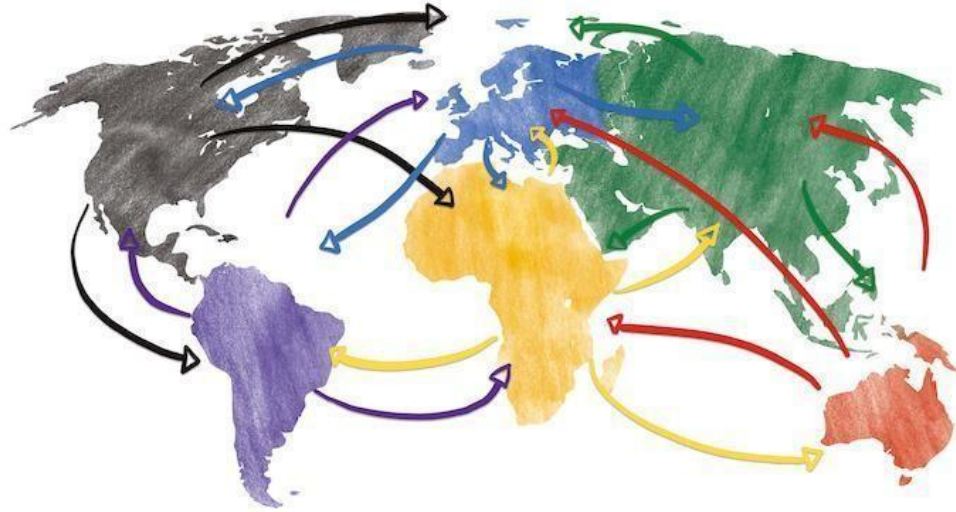


Figure 1

The effect that globalisation can have on the loss of languages can be devastating. Figure 1 displays what occurs due to globalisation, people across the world become more interconnected and are able to communicate more often. As people become more interconnected and are exposed to different cultures, they tend to learn parts of the language and culture. There is nothing inherently negative about that, but globalisation may also lead to the loss of languages. Cultures and languages which are less populated are expected to learn larger languages such as English, French, Spanish and Portuguese (Colonisation does also play a role in this, with the languages being imposed on a native population such as in Mexico by the Spanish). But in a globalised world, the larger languages with more speakers tend to dominate over the smaller lesser-known ones. This can lead to natives not learning their mother tongues but only learning the dominant language in order to live a life with more opportunities.

Another way in which globalisation can affect the loss of languages is through human immigration. Once a person permanently resides in a nation other than their own, they lose touch with their native language and adapt to the new languages. They then also do not see it to be necessary to teach their children their mother tongues which leads to less and less of that language being spoken. This might be done by parents in order to give their children better opportunities in the future.

Climate Change

Many linguists have pointed out that climate change and the loss of languages are interconnected. The loss of indigenous lands and indigenous heritage sites is a consequence of the accelerating climate change. These factors go hand-in-hand with one another as a result of this. Indigenous people are being displaced due to the rising sea levels and more extreme weather patterns. Indigenous knowledge about the environment is deeply affected, which is often verbally communicated. The support for these groups has historically been lacking. Although the groups, as well as climate change, are getting far more attention due to the pressing crisis, many member nations at the UN are not granting these groups the rights they were promised and they are not delivering on their promises in regard to climate change.

Colonisation

The impact that colonisation had and still has today through different forms of neo-colonialism is vast. We will take a closer look at the impact of the Spanish in Latin America throughout the 15th-19th centuries. However, there are far more examples which are still going on today, such as the United States of America with Puerto Rico and Hawaii.

Once the Spanish took control of territories in the Americas during the 15th century, they imposed their own lifestyles, religions, beliefs and will on the indigenous populations. The native Spanish were seen as superior due to their lighter skin colour. The Spanish colonists built churches and used the native population as slaves. They destroyed villages and tore apart indigenous groups, who were seen as a threat. Many of the native languages were lost and became extinct because of this.

Urbanisation

As a larger portion of the population moves into the larger cities, their own indigenous dialects and languages are often lost along with the move. As people look for better opportunities for themselves and their children, they leave behind their own languages and adapt to the language spoken in the city, in order to fit in more effectively. This is very similar to immigration.

Revived languages

Although the loss of languages is extremely common, the revival of these lost languages is not at all common. The only example of a fully revived language is Hebrew. It became an extinct language because of a failed revolt against the Roman Empire around 200 CE. The Roman emperor ordered the execution of Israeli Jews, so the language died out. It was not spoken for around 1800 years until Hebrew started being taught again in schools and used in daily life. Today there are over 7 million speakers of Hebrew whereas 150 years ago it was only a recorded language. Other indigenous languages, such as Cornish are also on the trend of becoming revived after it became extinct in the late 18th century because of modern English spreading in the United Kingdom. It has not fully been revived yet as there are less than 300 speakers currently. It is essential that languages which are lost are given a chance to be spoken again by an indigenous population. These will need to be protected and given freedom and time to be re-established.

Major Parties Involved

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNESCO is the organisation within the United Nations that promotes the diversity of languages and cultures. They are focused on the sustainable development of social human interactions and the manner in which different cultures communicate with one another. UNESCO is also able to assign World Heritage sites to any areas that need them. UNESCO includes language diversity as a basic principle in their constitution. They heavily aim to promote language diversity and protect all languages from becoming extinct.

United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)

The UNPFII is a forum that deals with all issues related to Indigenous groups. This includes indigenous languages and the manner in which they may be preserved. In order to come to a useful resolution, the UNPFII would be helpful. This forum brings together diplomats from larger nations and representatives of the Indigenous groups. This forum allows the Indigenous peoples' to voice their concerns and to promote a healthy relationship with major industrial powers in the world.

United States of America

The United States of America was established as an independent nation after the war of independence in the late 18th century, in which they defeated the British. Since then, the treatment of the indigenous population, who had previously lived on that land, severely deteriorated. The natives were used as slaves and were killed. Some historians believe that these were in fact de-facto genocides. Indigenous languages and cultures were crushed, meaning that many of these indigenous languages have become extinct. Currently, the United States of America treats indigenous cultures within their territory with more respect, but still has conflicts regarding indigenous lands.

Spain, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Portugal, Belgium and the Netherlands

These Empires had previously controlled almost every territory in the world, around 80%. They had colonised the lands and treated the indigenous peoples' very poorly through

violence and displacing them from their native lands. The indigenous and native languages were usually suppressed and the colonisers' language was used instead.

The rest of the World

The rest of the world is also affected by language loss and trying to promote it's diversity. No matter how small the population of a state or a nation is, each one has to deal with the threat of language loss. Each nation has examples of extinct languages as well as attempts to revitalise them.

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

There have been no specific resolutions passed by the United Nations in any capacity aiming to deal with the issue of the threat of language loss and promoting language diversity. However, the UN did pass some resolutions and implemented a few initiatives in order to address the issue:

- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 13 September 2007 (A/RES/61/295)
 - Notably, the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand voted against this resolution. This is not surprising considering that these nations have typically been on bad terms with Indigenous peoples.
 - In 2011 these four nations reversed their disapproval of the resolution and voted in favour

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

The United Nations has not passed any specified resolutions that deal with the threat of language loss or promoting language diversity. They have however adopted several resolutions and have tried to educate the public through different initiatives. Some of these include the UNDRIP listed in the section above, the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, which aim to provide a stable framework for language diversity, specifically SDG 4. Additionally, the United Nations labelled the year 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous languages, aimed at promoting the awareness and understanding of the importance of indigenous languages. 21st of February has been labelled as the International Mother Language Day. This day promotes multiculturalism and multilingualism, and the importance of understanding your mother tongue, which promotes sustainable development. Non-United Nations attempts at solving the issue have included

documenting endangered languages through written and spoken recordings. It is important to understand as well that there are many languages which are mainly spoken, and where a scripture does not exist on a large scale. This makes it much more difficult to preserve the language.



Most of the UN attempts at raising awareness have not brought about much change as they are not supported by most governments and implemented in public school systems. Most

children do not learn about indigenous languages and the importance of them and are therefore less open to change.

Possible Solutions

The solutions that are mentioned below can be applied to both subsections of the topic, preventing loss of languages and promoting language diversity. The first possible solution that could be implemented is the education and awareness of the masses in the world. Previous attempts have not been effective in raising widespread awareness for the threat of language loss. It would therefore be important to implement some sort of education within schooling systems that highlights the importance of having a diversified language in the world. This must be agreed on by nations with the largest population sizes to be effective.

A second solution, which is more focused on the prevention of language loss, is a more widespread and UNESCO led initiative to document languages that are in danger of extinction. Although this solution may not prevent the language from going extinct, as the last speaker passes away, there is a higher chance that the language can be revived. In order for this to occur however, the widespread documentation would need to be public and transparent. It would require a large and secure space in order to store all of the documentation. This will need to be agreed upon by all member states in order to be effective.

The implementation of laws in member states can be heavily encouraged and endorsed by UNESCO. This will include laws that promote linguistic and indigenous cultural diversity. These laws will make it possible for indigenous languages that are under threat to be recognised by the state. This will allow them to construct schools to keep teaching their languages. This can be effective if implemented, but it will be unlikely that all member states take an initiative to do this.

Another possible solution would be to promote the implementation of diverse languages in the arts. This includes films, music, plays, paintings. The encouragement may allow languages to stay diverse and have a distinct impact in that culture. Additionally, these communities, especially those with an endangered language, would benefit from such a resolution, as they would feel empowered to live their language.

These solutions are all possibilities, but there are many more and different ways in which language diversity can be promoted. These solutions will require the full support of most member states in order to actually be effective. If they are only implemented by a few nations there will be an inequity in terms of the distribution of language and cultural diversity, which has the potential to lead to larger conflicts.

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