

Endangered Languages

Over 2,000 languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers. More than half of the world's languages are in danger of dying out by the end of the century. What are they and how can we save them?



What is an endangered language?

UNESCO divides endangered languages into five categories. The most **critically endangered** languages are only spoken infrequently by grandparents and older generations.

Across the globe, 94% of the population speaks 6% of all languages in existence. Out of more than 7,000 languages, half the world speaks only 24 of them.

Some languages with very few speakers are not classed as endangered. For example, Hawaiian has only around 1,000 speakers but that number is stable, and the language is taught in schools.

Equally, some languages in Indonesia have as many as two million speakers, but they are vulnerable because they are only spoken by older generations.

How many endangered languages are there?

Around 2,000 languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers. According to a 2005 study, 473 of the world's living languages are critically endangered.

Linguists say we are living through a mass extinction of languages, with one dying out every two weeks. According to experts, 50% to 90% of

the world's languages could be extinct by the year 2100.

What is the world's most endangered language?

There are 64 languages that have only one or two speakers left.

In 2016, the last female speaker of Resígaro (an Amazonian language) was murdered. Her brother Pablo Ocagane is now its last remaining speaker.

The siblings were taught the dying language by their mother, who was descended from the Resígaro tribe.

What are some of the strangest languages?

Basque, which is spoken by 660,000 people in Spain and France, is totally unrelated to any other known language in the world. Classed as a **language isolate**, experts say it is a relic of European languages during the **Neolithic** period.

Some African languages use clicking sounds. In Botswana, all speakers of the Taa language develop a unique lump on their **larynx** from speaking the five basic clicks and 17 variations.

Other languages have unique linguistic features. Speakers of the South American Aymara language think of the past as in front of them and the future as behind them.

The Chalcatongo Mixtec language (spoken by 6,000 people in Oaxaca, Mexico) is officially the world's weirdest language.

"In this context, 'weird' means roughly [that it] has linguistic features that are unlike those of most other languages," wrote linguist Victor Mair. The language has no way of differentiating yes or no questions. For example, there is no difference between saying: "Is this bad?" and "This is bad."

Why are languages dying out?

While different tribes once spoke many varied languages, as modern societies formed it became beneficial to speak the language of the majority.

Historically, colonisation and warfare has seen hundreds of languages eradicated by force.

In the 20th century, **globalisation** and new technology have hastened the rate of language death.

English is the dominant language of the internet. There are now many millions more people who speak English as a second language than there are native English speakers.

- **Can they be saved?**

“When humanity loses a language, we also lose the potential for greater diversity in art, music,

literature, and oral traditions,” says Wikitongues founder Bogre Udell.

Since 2014, Wikitongues has been trying to create a public archive of every language in the world.

Many countries also have laws to protect regional languages.

There are success stories. After going extinct in the 1880s, Cornish was taken off the UN's list of endangered languages in 2010. Some speakers are now raising their children to speak Cornish as a first language.

Vocabulary Support

Critically endangered

The categories include: vulnerable, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct. Vulnerable languages are spoken by almost all children, but only in certain environments like at home.

Language isolate

Other famous examples of language isolates are Korean, Ainu (a Japanese language) and Sumerian (an ancient Mesopotamian language).

Neolithic

Roughly between 10,000 BC and 4500 BC. Also known as the New Stone Age.

Larynx

The voice box in your throat.

Globalisation

When businesses or organisations grow so big that they have power and influence across the world.