
Sahyadri Arts College, Kuvempu University, Shivamogga, India
Linguistics Seminar 14 December 2020

Language endangerment: what is it and what can we do about it?

Peter K. Austin
Department of Linguistics
SOAS, University of London

© Peter K. Austin 2020

Creative commons licence

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs

CC BY-NC-ND

www.peterkaustin.com

Thanks and absolution to: Lise Dobrin, Lenore
Grenoble, David Nathan, Julia Sallabank

Overview

- Global and local language diversity
 - Types of language situations
 - Responses
 - Actions
 - Conclusions
-

Linguistic diversity

Let's look at the situation regarding languages around the world, around India, and in Karnataka

How many languages are spoken today?

- Difficult question, because there is no easy way to distinguish ‘dialect’ and ‘language’
 - In some regions of the world we have very unreliable data – this is particularly true in South Asia, including India (see SEL talks by Prof Abbi and Prof Mishra, available on YouTube)
 - International survey by *Ethnologue* shows ...
-



Explore The Languages Of The World

Ethnologue contains information on 7,097 known living languages.

Begin by clicking [World Languages](#) in the page header or using one of the Browse By indexes in the page footer.

[READ MORE](#) »



Global distributions are skewed

- The actual size of populations who speak these 7,000 different languages is often hard to calculate but it varies widely, from over 1 billion to just a single individual
 - What are the top 10 largest languages in the world today?
-

Major world languages

Numbers of speakers in millions (2010)

	Mother tongue	Wider communication
1 Mandarin	875	1,000+ mostly China
2 Hindi/Urdu	366	490 mostly India and Pakistan
3 English	340	600+ *global
4 Spanish	325	420 *multinational
5 Arabic	280	350 *multinational
6 Bengali	205	211 India and Bangladesh
7 Portuguese	176	200 *multinational
8 Russian	167	280 mostly former Soviets
9 Japanese	125	126 mostly Japan
10 German	121	130 *multinational

Size of languages

- largest 10 languages each have 100+ million speakers (Mandarin, Spanish, English, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, Japanese) and together have 2.6 billion speakers (40% of world total)
 - largest 20 languages have 3.2 billion speakers (> 50% of world total)
 - 4% of world's languages are spoken by 96% of world's population, ie. only 4% of world's population speaks 96% of world's languages so there are many languages that are very small (50% have less than 10,000 speakers, 25% have less than 1,000)
-

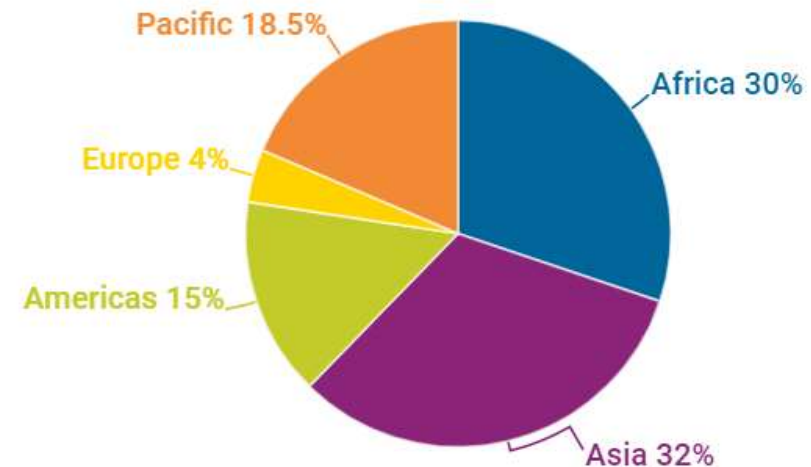
Distribution of languages (Ethnologue)

What continents have the most indigenous languages?

Asia has the most indigenous languages, closely followed by Africa. 

Combined, they account for nearly 2/3 of the world's languages. Myriad factors – terrain, cultural history, the spread of ancient civilizations – play into how many languages have originated within a certain area.

Percentage of the world's languages, by region

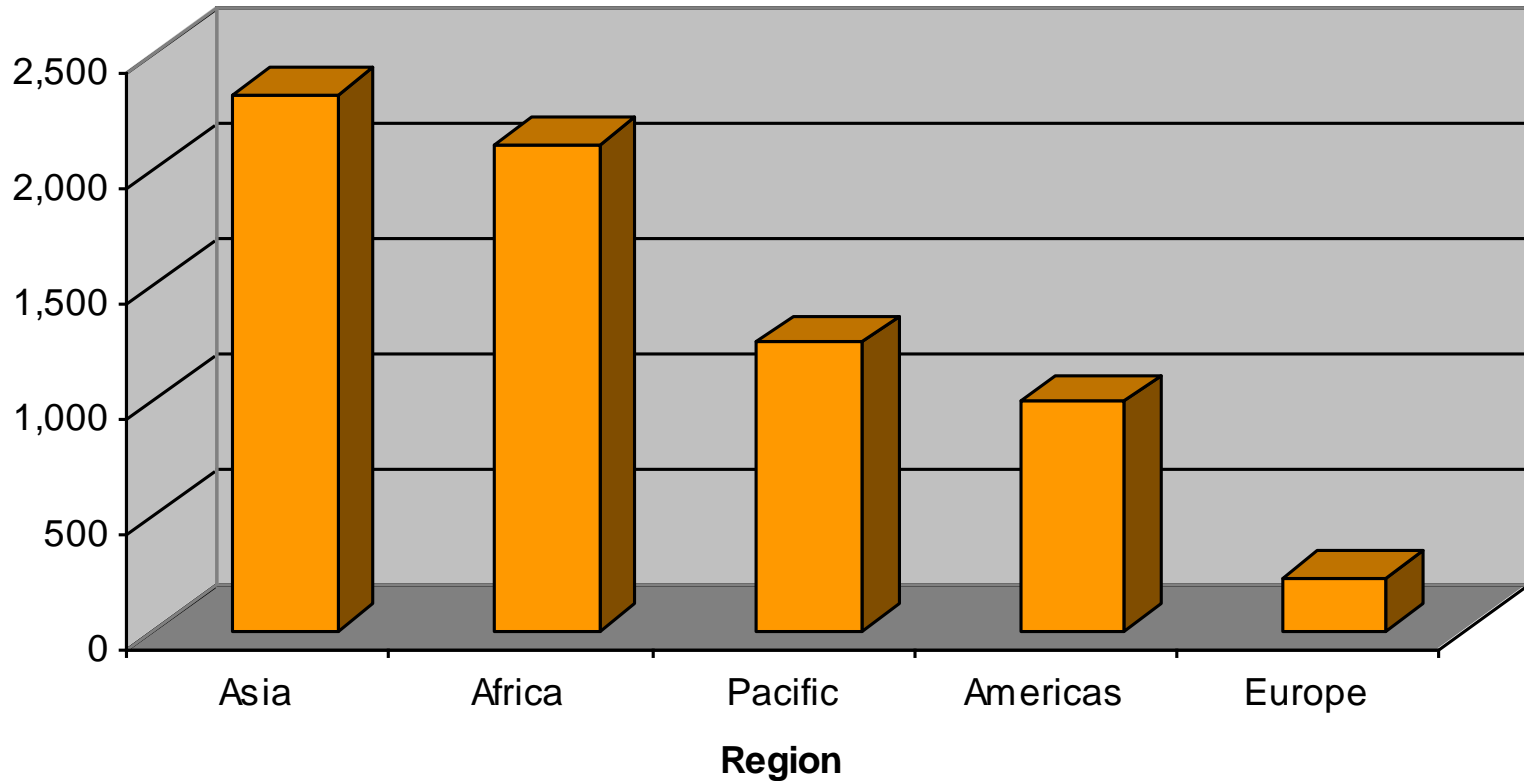


Geographical distributions

Area	Languages		Number of speakers
	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
Asia	2,296	32.4	3,929,931,706
Africa	2,139	30.1	847,791,487
Pacific	1,313	18.5	39,314,049
Americas	1,062	15.0	49,090,069
Europe	287	4.0	1,672,591,291
<i>Total</i>	7,097	100	6,506,259,160

Source: Lewis, Paul M. et al. 2013. *Ethnologue*. SIL International

Number of languages by area

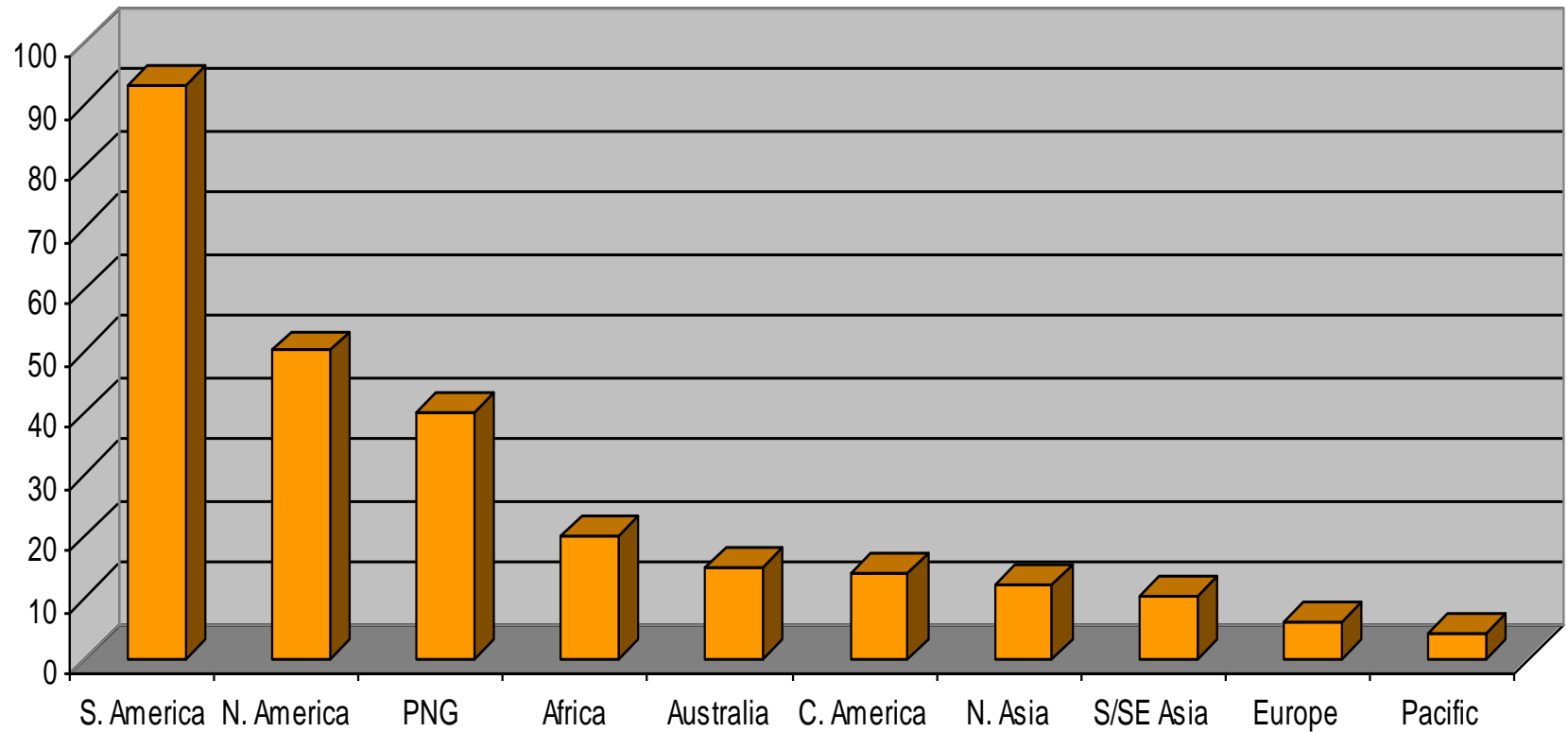


Linguistic genetic diversity

	language groups
S. America	93
N. America	50
PNG	40+
Africa	20
Australia	15
C. America	14
N. Asia	12
S/SE Asia	10
Europe	6
Pacific	4
World	251

Source: Nettle, Daniel and Suzanne Romaine 2000. *Vanishing Voices*, p37. Oxford University Press.

Language groups

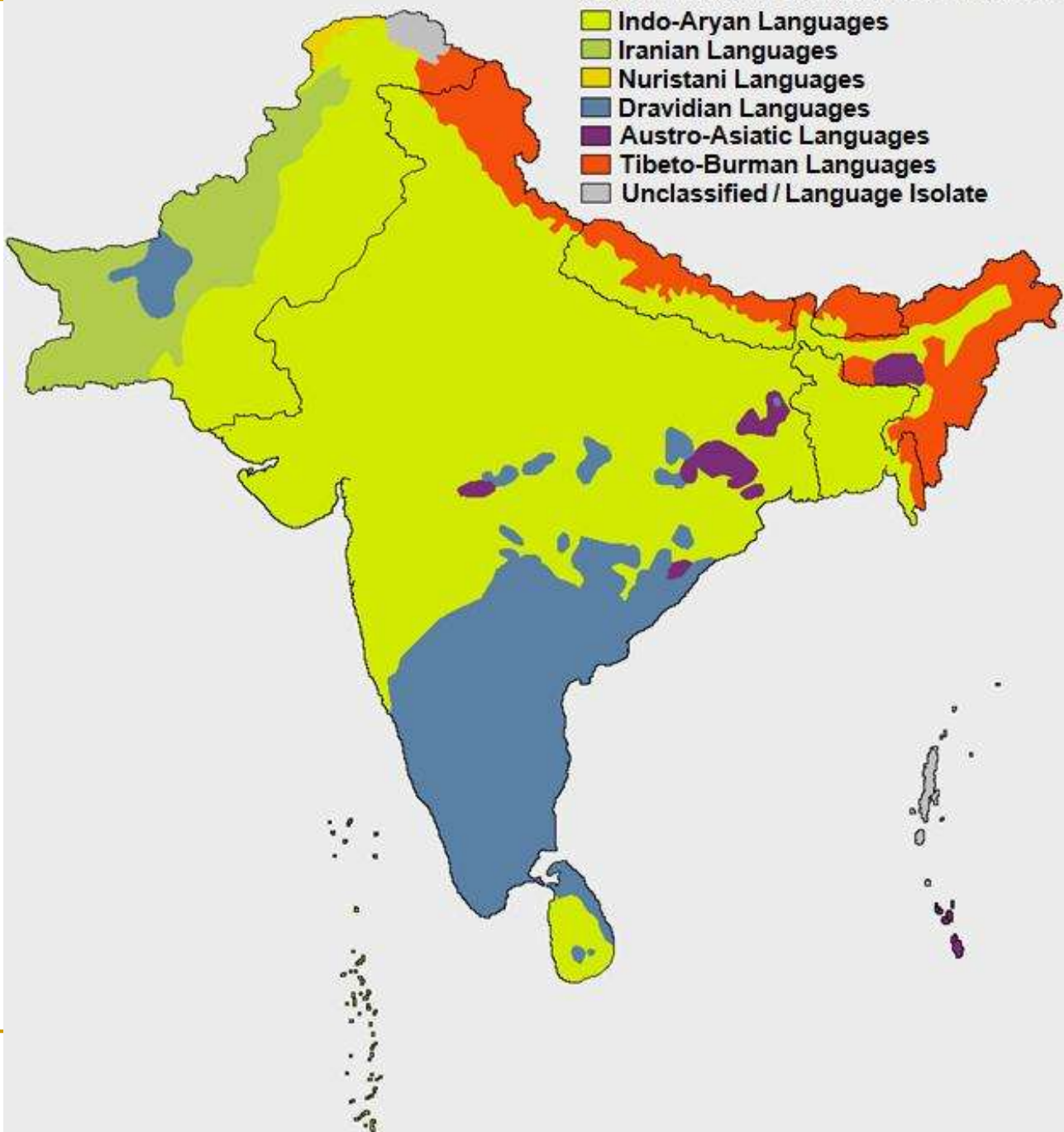


For India

- The 2011 Indian Census recognises 1369 “rationalized mother tongues” spoken by 10,000+ speakers, which are grouped into 121 languages. Of these, 22 are part of the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India
 - 78% of Indians speak an Indo-Aryan language, and 20% speak a Dravidian language; the remaining 2% speak Austroasiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, Andaman languages, plus a few isolates (without relatives)
-

SOUTH ASIAN LANGUAGE FAMILIES

- Indo-Aryan Languages
- Iranian Languages
- Nuristani Languages
- Dravidian Languages
- Austro-Asiatic Languages
- Tibeto-Burman Languages
- Unclassified / Language Isolate



For Karnataka

- Largest, official and most dominant language is Kannada. English is also economically and politically important, and Hindi has a role in relation to Central Government
 - Smaller languages include Urdu, Konkani, Marathi, Tulu, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kodava, Beary, and Sanskrit (i.e. Dravidian + Indo-Aryan)
-

Speaker community profiles

1. intergenerational language transmission
 2. percentage of speakers within total population (**not** absolute numbers)
 3. domains and functions of languages in use
 4. language attitudes and ideology of wider community, including recognition and status
 5. speakers' attitudes toward their own language (pride, shame)
-

Typology of language situations (**not** languages)

- **Viable (safe, strong)** - spoken by all age groups, learnt by children, actively supported (can be large or small populations)
- **Endangered** - socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from larger language, spoken by reducing population and could disappear without community support
- **Moribund** - languages no longer learnt by children with few older speakers, little social function
- **Extinct** - no native speakers

Note

- These are points on a continuum – language situations can be more or less ‘safe’ or more or less ‘endangered’
 - Much of the literature on language endangerment suffers three big problems:
 - ❖ **Objectification** – treating languages (dynamic means of interaction and communication) as objects/things and trying to quantify/count them
 - ❖ **Essentialism** – treating characteristics of language situations as being absolutely necessary or fixed
 - ❖ **Absolutism** – treating situations as homogeneous, rather than fluid and flexible, and contingent on other aspects
-

Language shift

- Some languages have become extinct as a result of wars, genocide, disease or loss of population, e.g. Great Andaman
- Many languages have seen a radical reduction in speaker numbers in past 40 years across many regions of the world, often within one or two generations, as speakers shift to dominant languages with more economic, social, political power
- increasing age profiles of remaining speakers — lack of transmission to children
- Krauss 1992 “the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages”
- less extreme estimate is 50% (**only** 3,500 languages!)
- *Endangered Languages Project* (Hawaii) estimates one language is lost every 2.5 months

Language shift

- World-wide pattern of language loss - languages move **safe --> endangered --> moribund --> extinct**
 - Historical evidence, eg. Italian peninsula: Oscan, Umbrian, Piceni, Etruscan, Gaulish all replaced by Latin
 - In last 200 years and especially last 65 years process has speeded up through colonialism, rise of hegemonic nation states (with monolingual ideologies), migration, urbanisation, and globalisation
-

Should we care?

1. **NO** we shouldn't — fewer languages are better — loss of languages leads to mutual understanding and global peace and would be economically rational (but: naive and counter-examples, also whose language will be the chosen one?)
 2. **YES**, because we need diversity (ecological analogy)
 3. **YES**, because languages express identity
 4. **YES**, because languages are repositories of history and culture
 5. **YES**, because language contributes to the sum of human knowledge (each language represents a different view of the world)
 5. **YES**, because languages have economic value
 6. **YES**, because languages are inherently interesting
-

Is it a hopeless situation?

NO, there is evidence that language shift can be reversed,
eg

Welsh now has increased speakers; because of education
more children now speak Welsh than past 50 years

Maori, New Zealand - *kohanga reo* 'language nests' have
created new generation of speakers

Hawaiian - similar model created new speakers

Taiwan - reversal of monolingual language policy,
introduction of languages in education, training of
aboriginal speakers

Etc etc

How can we respond?

- Do nothing – the response of the majority of researchers and academics in Linguistics
 - Say it's a terrible shame languages are disappearing, and maybe give some money to Society for Endangered and Lesser-known Languages (SEL) etc.
 - Make noise publicly and organise events but do nothing else
-



\$1

AUSTRALIA

2019 | INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF

Indigenous Languages

Noisy lamentations

- Unesco International Year of Indigenous Languages – lots of international events, workshops, publicity. But how will this impact on language shift?
 - Much of this activity uses rhetoric of death, dying, disappearance, loss, ancient languages and cultures
 - Tendency to objectification, treating languages (and speakers) as things divorced from their human, social and cultural context – example: Lena Herzog’s “Last Whispers” (<https://www.lastwhispers.org/>)
-

Other ways to respond

- Be interested and find out if and how we can get involved – do some research, speak to others, join networks of concerned communities and scholars, get some relevant training and preparation
 - Combine our Linguistics studies with reading and studies on anthropology, politics, ethics, social justice, de-colonialisation
-

What else can we do?

- work with members of language communities
 - try to understand language use patterns and language attitudes
 - explore if there are ways to address the underlying social, political, economic, health, welfare, and social justice factors that trigger language shift
 - provide reliable and comprehensible information to communities
 - inform relevant stakeholders, including international organisations, governments, and general public
-

Documenting language ecology and vitality

- Sociolinguistic survey of community language use: who speaks what to whom, when, where, and how?
 - Survey of attitudes and beliefs about languages: “our language is useless because we can’t write it”, “it’s better for children to learn Hindi or English before they begin school to help them study better”, “if you learn English you’ll get a good job and marry well”
 - Participant action research engages community members and trains and empowers them (SEL talk by Prof Suraratdecha)
-

Del Hymes 'Ethnography of Speaking'

- **S**etting and Scene: "Setting refers to the time and place of a speech act and, in general, to the physical circumstances". Scene is the "psychological setting" or "cultural definition" of a scene, including characteristics such as range of formality and sense of play or seriousness (Hymes 1974: 55-56).
 - **P**articipants: Speaker and audience. There may be distinctions within these categories, eg. some of audience can be distinguished as addressees and others as hearers.
 - **E**nd: Purposes, goals, and outcomes.
 - **A**ct Sequence: Form and order of the speech event.
 - **K**ey: Cues which set the "tone, manner, or spirit" of the speech act.
-

Del Hymes 'Ethnography of Speaking'

- **I**nstrumentalities or channels: Forms and styles of speech.
- **N**orms: Social rules governing the event and the participants' actions and reaction.
- **G**enre: Such as monologue, narrative, procedurals, etc.

Saville-Troike (2003) offers a more comprehensive compilation of analytic units in the ethnography of communication.

What else can we do?

- If the conditions are right and the community is supportive, work on **documentation**, **protection**, and **support** of local language ecologies in a respectful and collaborative manner
 - within Linguistics there is a new sub-field called “Language Documentation” which aims to record a range of language use by a variety of speakers in a variety of social and cultural contexts, to create a multi-functional and long-lasting record of the languages in use in a given community
 - This is a specialist area that requires training (e.g. at CIIL in Mysuru 2018-2019)
-

What else can we do?

- If the conditions are right and the community is supportive, it may be possible to **revitalise** or help to **maintain** and strengthen the local languages
 - **Revitalisation** involves: (1) increasing and strengthening the domains of language use, especially in digital contexts; and/or (2) increasing the number of speakers by teaching it to children and adults (as a second or third language)
 - **Language maintenance** involves strengthening and supporting languages, developing educational materials and curricula, mother-tongue education, expanding literacy, and use in spoken and written media
-

March 2013 workshop, 4 generations



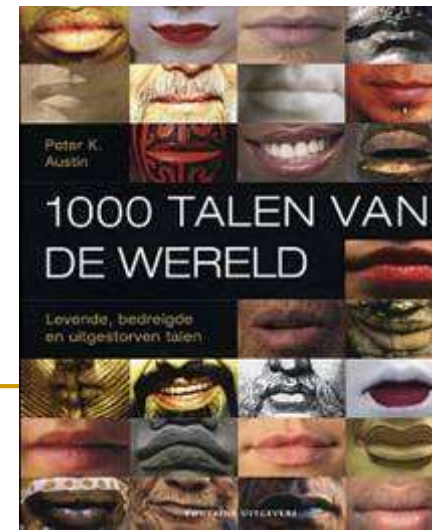
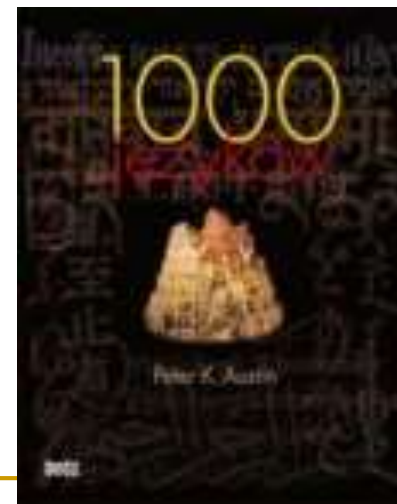
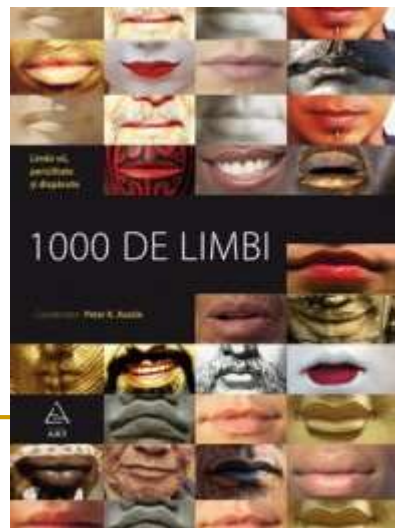
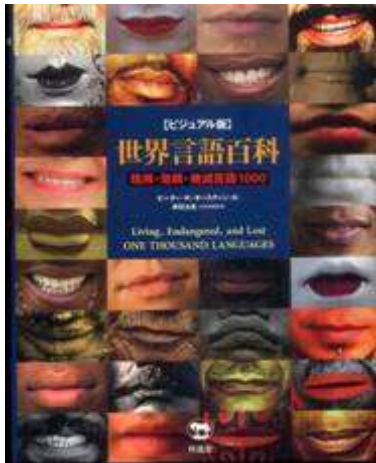
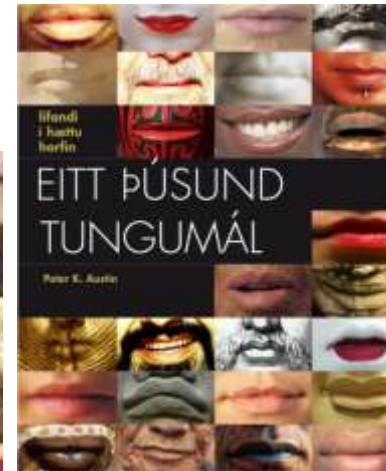
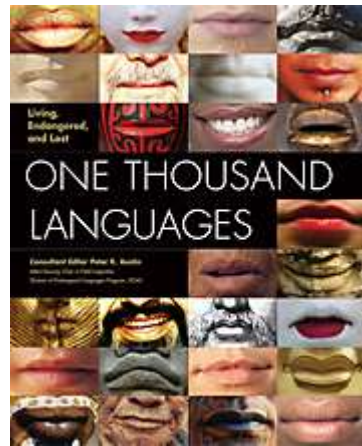
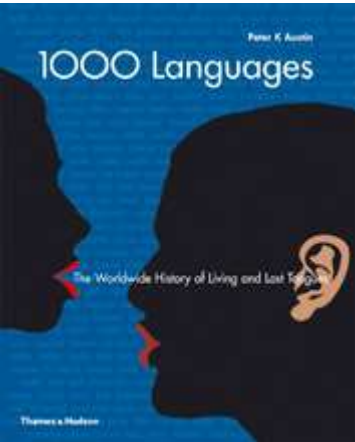
Spreading information

- disseminate information on all aspects of language diversity as widely as possible within the heritage language community and internationally
 - raise awareness of endangered languages inside and outside communities where they are spoken through all channels and using the media
 - use social media, exhibitions and the arts to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity
-

Information sharing

- Books and publications for general public
 - Exhibitions and displays (outreach)
 - Use of new media (blogs, Facebook, YouTube) and old media (press, TV, movies)
 - Training courses – CIIL Mysuru, online webinars
 - This can be challenging for academics and researchers not used to having to explain their work in terms that educated ordinary persons can understand
-

Information sharing





LIVING LANGUAGE



HEARING VOICES
LANGUAGES/SPEAKERS

Introduction Location
Voices Songs
Khai and San Languages Endangered Languages
John Wytro Credits

Bokamoso Pre-School Training Project Choir

Qyoo eka le chilo ke
Xai me le ka leme ke
Nape le le ka rikon me Nape le
Cane ka mite wale le le
Qai le le Nape le le ka le

sun'choa and na. It is one of the languages of the Ghanzi District in Botswana. It is one of the languages of the Ghanzi District in Botswana. It is one of the languages of the Ghanzi District in Botswana.

The language is highly endangered and may disappear within a generation. !Xóö is spoken in the western Kgalega District of Botswana and in some southern parts of the Ghanzi District. There are 2100 speakers in Botswana.

Languages:
 [X] Xhosa
 [G] Gana
 [O] Gwi
 [N] Naro
 [X] !Xóö

Speaker(s):

!Xóö

Endangered Languages Week

*language
endangerment
&
sustainability*

22 - 27 february 2010

talks - films - demos - debate - workshop
 school of oriental and african studies
 russell square, london
www.hrelp.org/elw

ENDANGERED LANGUAGES WEEK

UK PREMIERE
7PM, 7TH MAY 08
SOAS KLT

ADMISSION FREE
WWW.HRELP.ORG

THE LINGUISTS

Produced by Nicholas... The Linguists... Directed by Nicholas...

***endangered
languages***

**who ?
cares?**

23 - 28 february 2009

endangered languages week
 workshops - films - debate
 school of oriental and african studies
www.hrelp.org/elw

**ENDANGERED
LANGUAGES
WEEK 2011**

9TH - 14TH MAY
 TALKS, DISPLAYS, DISCUSSIONS,
 FILMS, LECTURES AND WORKSHOPS
SOAS, London www.hrelp.org/elw

Blogs



[Home](#) [About the Author](#) [About this blog](#) [Jiwarli speaker](#) [Location](#) [Spelling](#)

Home

What does Jiwarli sound like?

What does Jiwarli sound like?

🕒 June 18, 2015 👤 Jiwarli

In order to introduce the Jiwarli language and its last speaker, Jack Butler, here is the beginning of a traditional story that Jack recorded on 3rd November 1983 and transcribed and translated with Peter Austin on 17th May 1984.



The story tells the tale of the bird *kapakurta* 'spotted nightjar' (*Eurostopodus argus*) and the bat *mikalyaji* 'type of bat' (species unknown). These two are related as *ngathal* 'same sex cross-cousins'; the term 'cross-cousin' means either the

child of one's father's sister or the child of one's mother's brother. Since the two protagonists are understood to be male, *ngathal* here can mean either 'father's sister's son' or 'mother's brother's son'. In Jiwarli this kind of cousin is distinguished from *punkali* 'opposite sex cross-cousin', that is, for a woman it would be her father's sister's son, or mother's brother's son. For a man *punkali* refers to his cousin who is his father's sister's daughter or his mother's brother's daughter.

The two protagonists kill a man called *Pipjankurru*, boss of all the people. After some

RECENT POSTS

[Jiwarli dictionary](#)
[What does jiwarli sound like?](#)
[Welcome to the jiwarli blog](#)

RECENT COMMENTS

ARCHIVES

[June 2015](#)

CATEGORIES

[Uncategorized](#)

META

[Register](#)
[Log in](#)
[Entries \[RSS\]\(#\)](#)
[Comments \[RSS\]\(#\)](#)
[WordPress.com](#)

[Follow](#) ...

Folsom Prisonanhi

Posted on 19/03/2013 by pkaustin



Dakota Warren (on ukelele) and Chris Dodd (on guitar) accompany singing in Dieri

At the language workshop last weekend (16th and 17th March) for part of the time we worked on singing a Dieri version of the Johnny Cash song "Folsom Prison Blues". Greg Wilson and the Port Augusta group had translated the whole song into Dieri last year, and Peter Austin had checked the translation, so we were ready to call on Chris Dodd to accompany the 45 attendees in singing it.


The song is a bit challenging because it contains some quite complex grammatical constructions (and long words) so we looked at the words and their meanings and then how these could be fitted to the tune. We practised several times and in the end made a good recording of the first verse. Here it is:



Here are the words in Dieri:



On-site training courses

 **CENTRAL INSTITUTE OF INDIAN LANGUAGES**

(Department of Higher Education, MHRD, Government of India)
Manasagangotri, Mysuru - 570 006

SCHEME FOR PROTECTION AND PRESERVATION OF ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

**5 DAY WORKSHOP
ON
LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION AND
REVITALIZATION**

Dates: 26 February to 2 March 2018

Venue: Conference Hall (2nd Floor), CIIL, Mysuru



Local perspectives

- work on **documentation**, **protection**, and **support** of local linguistic diversity in a respectful and collaborative manner
 - work with members of language communities, including immigrant groups, and people in diaspora communities
 - understand language use patterns, language attitudes, and community aspirations for education and language and cultural maintenance
 - provide reliable and comprehensible information
 - inform relevant stakeholders, including government policy makers and general public
-

Local community education

- help communities to understand the situation of their languages
 - provide research training opportunities to members of the community
 - provide language teacher training opportunities for community members
 - support communities to foster the position of their languages
 - support the use of the languages in a range of different contexts
-

Challenges

- In a globalising world, no country is isolated, and no country can escape linguistic and cultural issues/rights
 - No country can afford to adopt a mono-cultural ideology – political and economic costs are high, and missed opportunities are too great
 - There is a need for better education and information about the values and benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism – intercultural communication becomes paramount
 - Dangers of ghetto and siege mentality on several sides
-

Conclusions

- We need more training at all levels to deal with the socio-politics of language and cultural developments in the rapidly changing world we now live in, including ethical, moral and social justice aspects
 - There are both local and global opportunities to contribute to the continuation of the richness of the world's linguistic and cultural diversity, and in the process reaffirm identities while opening up avenues for communication and increased respect for minority and endangered languages
-

Conclusions

And it is students and early-career scholars, especially indigenous researchers and activists, who can help lead the way to a future that respects and appreciates multilingualism, top-quality research, and concern for the rights and needs of minority communities to help document, preserve, and develop their linguistic and cultural heritages, both locally and globally

Thank you!
