

The World's Indigenous Languages In Context

Authored by global oneness project

There are approximately 7,000 living languages spoken around the world. Up to half of the world's languages are oral with no written dictionaries.¹ Indigenous languages are passed from person to person, through words, stories, prayers, and songs that have formed and evolved within the places where they have long been rooted. It is estimated that half of the world's languages will disappear by 2100 if nothing is done to preserve them.²

In 2016, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2019 as the [International Year of Indigenous Languages](#).³ IYIL2019 was created as a recommendation by the [Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#) (UNPFII).⁴ Founded in 2000, the UNPFII is the United Nations advisory body that makes recommendations on Indigenous issues related to [economic and social development, culture, the environment, education, health, and human rights](#).

There are over 370 million Indigenous people around the world in 90 countries.⁵ Indigenous languages are incredibly diverse and represent the majority of the world's linguistic and cultural heritage. According to UNESCO, "Languages are not only tools of communication, they also reflect a view of the world. Languages are vehicles of value systems and cultural expressions and are an essential component of the living heritage of humanity. Yet, many of them are in danger of disappearing."⁶



¹ [Survival International: Indigenous Languages](#)

² [UN: International Year of Indigenous Languages](#)

³ [UN: International Year of Indigenous Languages](#)

⁴ [UN: Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#)

⁵ [UN: International Year of Indigenous Languages](#)

⁶ (PDF) [UNESCO: Language Vitality and Endangerment](#)

Causes of Language Loss

“The world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used. Just as the human species is putting itself in danger through the destruction of species diversity, so might we be in danger from the destruction of the diversity of knowledge systems.” Linguist Leanne Hinton, Ph.D.⁷

Educators and researchers suggest that in order to address language revitalization efforts today, we must confront the “historic and ongoing inequities which lead to language endangerment.”⁸ From declared wars on tribal nations, genocide, and forced assimilation, to more hidden systems of oppression, centuries of European colonization have contributed to widespread loss of Indigenous life and culture, including language.

Colonial boarding schools were one main cause of language loss. They were used to assimilate Indigenous peoples into the dominant culture, often operated by Christian missionaries, particularly in Latin America, North America, the Arctic, and the Pacific, with the intent of Christianizing the Native population. In North America, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries, government-supported boarding schools forcibly removed children from their homes and prohibited them from contacting their families.⁹ In these schools, children were prohibited from wearing traditional Indigenous clothing or hairstyles or speaking in their mother tongue. In many of these schools, children died due to disease, neglect, and abuse. Many of the children who returned home years later had either forgotten their first language or chose not to speak it due to the impacts of trauma. The UN report [“Indigenous Peoples and Boarding Schools: A Comparative Study”](#) provides a global overview of the varying impacts to Indigenous peoples worldwide.¹⁰

Additional causes of language endangerment around the world include the following:

1. Natural catastrophes, famine, and disease.
2. War and genocide.
3. Overt repression for the purpose of “national unity.”
4. Cultural/political/economic dominance. Education policies ignore or exclude local languages. There is also lack of recognition or political representation, as well as bans on the use of minority languages in public life.¹¹

Many potential new Indigenous speakers may not have the appropriate time or family/community support needed to learn their languages. Language programs also need

⁷ Leanne Hinton and Ken Hale, eds., *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001).

⁸ Teresa L. McCarty, Sheilah E. Nicholas and Gillian Wigglesworth, eds., *A World of Indigenous Languages: Politics, Pedagogies and Prospects for Language Reclamation* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2019).

⁹ (PDF) Smith, Andrea. [Indigenous Peoples and Boarding Schools: A Comparative Study](#).

¹⁰ (PDF) Smith, Andrea. [Indigenous Peoples and Boarding Schools: A Comparative Study](#).

¹¹ (PDF) Julia Sallabank, [“Language Endangerment: Problems and Solutions.”](#) eSharp, Special Issue: Communicating Change: Representing Self and Community in a Technological World (2010), pp. 50-87.

funding. Many Indigenous tribes and tribal nations around the world still struggle today to gain sufficient recognition, funding, and legislation from their local and federal governments for language revitalization programs. Often, funding is only provided for the recording of languages with limited funds going towards the language revitalization programs themselves. In the absence of widespread government support, many Indigenous communities have instituted their own education programs aimed at keeping their languages alive and flourishing.¹²

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Studies show that language loss is also tied to the loss of ecological health. As the diversity of languages decreases, biodiversity does as well, suggesting a strong link between language and land.¹³ The lands that Indigenous people inhabit today are home to 80 percent of the world's remaining biodiversity. These lands are rich with natural resources that are at risk of being appropriated, sold, or pillaged by governments and private companies. Indigenous communities often have a reciprocal relationship with their ancestral land and possess intimate knowledge of sustainable ecological practices, also known as traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). Many governments only recognize a small fraction of this land as legally belonging to Indigenous communities, which contributes to environmental, social, and economic conflict and loss of cultural identities, including languages.¹⁴

Also known as cultural knowledge, TEK “has been passed on from generation to generation, through language as well as practical teachings. TEK has shaped ways of life, worldviews, and sense of place, serving material as well as psychological and spiritual needs.”¹⁵ Cultural knowledge is acquired by Indigenous and local people over many thousands of years through direct contact with the environment. Cultural knowledge “includes an intimate and detailed knowledge of plants, animals, and natural phenomena, the development and use of appropriate technologies for hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry and a holistic knowledge, or ‘worldview’ which parallels the scientific disciplines of ecology.”¹⁶ Stephen Augustine (Mi’kmaq elder), Cape Breton University’s Associate Vice-President of Indigenous Affairs in Canada, describes how Indigenous knowledge is “based on the belief that all things are connected and must be considered within the context of that interrelationship.”¹⁷

¹² (PDF) [UN: Indigenous Languages](#)

¹³ Benjamin T. Wilder, Carolyn O'Meara, Laurie Monti, Gary Paul Nabhan, [“The Importance of Indigenous Knowledge in Curbing the Loss of Language and Biodiversity.”](#) *BioScience*, Volume 66, Issue 6, 1 June 2016, Pp 499–509.

¹⁴ [UNESCO: Teaching and Learning for a Sustainable Future: Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainability](#)

¹⁵ (PDF) [Terralingua: An Introduction to Biocultural Diversity](#)

¹⁶ (PDF) Manitoba Education and Training: [A Teacher’s Guide for the Video Sila Alangotok—Inuit Observations on Climate Change](#)

¹⁷ Bruchac, Margaret. (2014). [Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Knowledge](#). In Smith, Claire. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, Chap.10, pp.3814–3824. New York: Springer Science and Business Media.

Another definition, which puts TEK in context, is from Gregory Cajete, Ph.D. (Tewa from Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico). Cajete is a Native American educator, author, and professor of Native American Studies and Language Literacy Sociocultural Studies at the University of New Mexico. He describes TEK as Native science. He writes, “Native science is the collective heritage of human experience with the natural world; in its most essential form, it is a map of natural reality drawn from the experience of thousands of human generations. It has given rise to the diversity of human technologies...[I]n profound ways Native science can be said to be ‘inclusive’ of modern science, although most Western scientists would go to great lengths to deny such inclusivity.”¹⁸

Language Revitalization

In 2007, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the General Assembly. The Declaration is a universal, comprehensive framework containing a set “of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, and well-being of the indigenous peoples of the world and it elaborates on existing human rights standards and fundamental freedoms as they apply to the specific situation of indigenous peoples.”¹⁹

Article 13 of the Declaration states the following: “Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.” And, Article 14 states, “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.”²⁰

The movement to revitalize endangered languages has grown over several decades.²¹ Language revitalization can be defined as learning activities which are designed “to cultivate new speakers of a language where intergenerational transmission has been severely disrupted and children are no longer acquiring their ancestral language as a first language.”²²

Language revitalization can take place in many venues, including “community classes, summer camps, master-apprentice programs, the development of pedagogical books and multimedia materials, and most visibly schools, where, depending on community capability, there have been classes, or bilingual programs, or full immersion programs in the local language.”²³ Additional venues, or methods, to teach and revitalize languages and cultural knowledge

¹⁸ Gregory Cajete, *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 2000).

¹⁹ [UN: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

²⁰ (PDF) UN: [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

²¹ Leanne Hinton, *Bringing our Languages Home: Language Revitalization for Families* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2013).

²² Leanne Hinton and Ken Hale, eds., *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001).

²³ Leanne Hinton, *Bringing our Languages Home: Language Revitalization for Families* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2013).

around the world include online and written dictionaries, phrase books, and language nests, or early childhood learning programs, where children from infancy to age five are fully immersed in the language.²⁴ The role of youth and intergenerational ties are essential to these language projects.²⁵ For many Indigenous communities around the world, revitalization efforts take place at a local and grassroots level, sometimes with just one individual or a single-family behind the efforts.

Indigenous peoples, as well as language documentation researchers, are using technology to counter the loss of their languages and cultures. Technology provides ways for teaching materials to be used with audio files, which helps to solve the challenge of relying on written materials and print literacy.²⁶ Additional technological approaches to support language revitalization include YouTube, language apps, computer software (including Rosetta Stone), interactive computer games, podcasts, and social media, to name a few. According to UNESCO, “The cooperative efforts of language communities, language professionals, NGOs and governments will be indispensable in countering this threat. There is a pressing need to build support for language communities in their efforts to establish meaningful new roles for their endangered languages.”²⁷

According to linguists, researchers, and Indigenous language speakers, the most important location for language revitalization is in the home, “the primary place where first language acquisition occurs.”²⁸ According to Margaret Nooden, Ojibwe language teacher, poet, and linguist, “History has proven it is incredibly difficult to maintain ethnic identity without the language running like lifeblood through every daily act. If we are to learn from this lesson, the language must certainly be restored. And more importantly, the educational system that took it away cannot be depended upon to bring it back. We should not look for an answer in politics, policy, or pedagogy alone. We must find the answer in practice and action. To reverse the damage, the language must be returned to the children and the home.”²⁹

²⁴ Chambers, Natalie A. (2015). Language nests as an emergent global phenomenon: Diverse approaches to program development and delivery. *The International Journal of Holistic Early Learning and Development*, 1, 25-38.

²⁵ Teresa L. McCarty, Sheilah E. Nicholas and Gillian Wigglesworth, eds., *A World of Indigenous Languages: Politics, Pedagogies and Prospects for Language Reclamation* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2019).

²⁶ Teresa L. McCarty, Sheilah E. Nicholas and Gillian Wigglesworth, eds., *A World of Indigenous Languages: Politics, Pedagogies and Prospects for Language Reclamation* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2019).

²⁷ (PDF) UNESCO: [Language Vitality and Endangerment](#)

²⁸ Leanne Hinton, *Bringing our Languages Home: Language Revitalization for Families* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2013).

²⁹ Margaret Nooden, “Wenesh Waa Oshkii-Bmaadiziig Noondamowaad? What Will the Young Children Hear?” in *Indigenous Language Revitalization: Encouragement, Guidance & Lessons Learned*, ed. Jon Reyhner and Louise Lockard (Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University college of Education, 2009).