

Exploring Indigenous Language Vitality: Vocabulary

Authored by global oneness project

Indigenous Languages - Languages that are native to specific places and regions in the world. An Indigenous language is a local way of communicating between tribal members, family, and community that contains the information, knowledge, and identity of a culture.¹

Indigenous Peoples - First people to a region. Also called Native, original, First Peoples and Aboriginal Peoples.² **Note: There are many ways to define an Indigenous person. All Indigenous groups are unique to the places in which they live.*³

Language - How humans communicate, connect, and share information.

Language Endangerment - When a language is spoken only by elders or older members of a culture or community and is no longer used intergenerationally.⁴

Language Preservation - Efforts to keep endangered or at-risk languages from disappearing.

Language Revitalization - Learning activities, such as language immersion schools, “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.”⁵

Language Vitality – The following nine factors from UNESCO are used to assess the state and vitality of a community’s language, which can assist with policy development and with the identification of determining safeguarding measures:⁶

1. Absolute number of speakers
2. Proportion of speakers within the total population
3. Availability of materials for language education and literacy
4. Response to new domains and media
5. Type and quality of documentation
6. Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use
7. Shifts in domains of language use
8. Community member’s attitudes towards their own language
9. Intergenerational language transmission

¹ 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).

² [Amnesty International: Indigenous Peoples](#); [The World Bank: Indigenous Peoples](#)

³ [UNPFII: Who Are Indigenous Peoples Factsheet](#)

⁴ (Program and Meeting Document) [UNESCO: Language Vitality and Endangerment](#)

⁵ 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).

⁶ [UNESCO: Language Vitality](#)

World Languages - Languages around the world with global speaker populations, with numbers above 100 million. The following eleven world languages have the largest populations: Mandarin, English, Hindi, Spanish, Russian, Bengali, Arabic, Portuguese, French, German, and Japanese.⁷

UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework⁸

Safe - language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted

Vulnerable - most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)

Definitely endangered - children no longer learn the language as a 'mother tongue' in the home

Severely endangered - language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves

Critically endangered - the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently

Extinct - there are no speakers left

⁷ Peter K. Austin, ed., *Living, Endangered, and Lost: One Thousand Languages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

⁸ (Program and Meeting Document) [UNESCO: Language Vitality and Endangerment](#)