

Scientific assessment of endangered languages produces mixed results

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A new study of the progress made over the last 25 years in documenting and revitalizing endangered languages shows both significant advances and critical shortfalls. The article, "Language documentation twenty-five years on", by Frank Seifart (CNRS & Université de Lyon, University of Amsterdam, and University of Cologne), Nicholas Evans (ARC Centre of Excellence for the Dynamics of Language, The Australian National University), Harald Hammarström (Uppsala University and Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History) and Stephen C. Levinson (Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics), will be published in the December, 2018 issue of the scholarly journal *Language*.

This article is being published as UNESCO's International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019 is fast approaching. It is a follow-up to the seminal article by Ken Hale et al. that appeared in *Language* in 1992. The study presents the most reliable figures on world-wide languages endangerment so far: more than half of the close to 7,000 now living languages are currently endangered. Around 600 of these are already nearly extinct, and are now only spoken occasionally by members of the grandparent generation. About 950 [endangered languages](#) are still also spoken by children, but the proportion of children acquiring these languages is getting smaller and smaller. The authors warn that "if this trend is not reversed, these languages will also die out."

With the growing network of researchers carrying out [language documentation](#) around the world, and helped by [technological progress](#) for data collection, processing and archiving, our scientific knowledge of

the world's languages has significantly increased over the past 25 years. So has the engagement of indigenous researchers on their own languages. Over this period, many hundreds of languages have been documented in sustainably archived audio and video collections, as well as more traditional products like grammars and dictionaries. But the study also shows that well over a third of the world's languages, including over 1,400 endangered languages, are still severely under-described, and lack even basic information on their grammar and lexicon, let alone proper documentation of culture-specific language use.

The authors sound an urgent alarm: "The potential loss if linguists do not up their game is enormous on all accounts." The documentation of linguistic diversity keeps turning up new phenomena and there are no signs that new discoveries are tailing off. These discoveries keep driving linguistics to broaden its canon of possible grammatical categories. Whole new meaning domains have been discovered, and entirely new speech sounds are also still being brought to light. Beyond such core categories of linguistic structure, work with little-studied languages is expanding our knowledge of how [language](#) is learned, processed, socially organized, aesthetically extended, and how it evolves, within as little as one generation.

The authors conclude that there are thus many reasons for intensifying research on small and often endangered languages. Such research can now take full advantage of technological developments through automating particularly time-consuming aspects of transcription work. But intensifying this work also depends on full recognition of the value of linguistic diversity, ranging from international observances by UNESCO, all the way through to the admissibility of descriptive and documentary research as degree work in academic programs.

More information: A pre-print version of the article may be found at: https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/e05_94.4Seifart.pdf .

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