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UNESCO on-line atlas seeks to save dying languages



19 February 2009 – The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) today launched an interactive electronic version of its atlas cataloguing some 2,500 endangered languages worldwide. The updated Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing can continually be supplemented, corrected and updated based on user contributions.

It ranks the dying languages according to five levels: unsafe, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct.

Data shows that out of the 6,000 languages currently in existence, over 200 have died out over the last three generations, 538 are critically endangered, 502 severely endangered, 632 definitely endangered and 607 unsafe.

According to the Atlas, unveiled on the eve of International Mother Language Day (21 February), nearly 200 languages have fewer than 10 speakers and 178 others have between 10 and 50 speakers.

The language of Manx in the Isle of Man died out in 1974 when Ned Maddrell, the last speaker, passed away while Eyak, in Alaska, United States, met its demise last year with the death of Marie Smith Jones.

“The death of a language leads to the disappearance of many forms of intangible cultural heritage, especially the invaluable heritage of traditions and oral expressions of the community that spoke it – from poems and legends to proverbs and jokes,” said UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura.

More than 30 linguists worked on the Atlas, which highlights how the phenomenon of disappearing languages is evident in every region and in varying economic conditions.

Nearly one-third of all of the world's languages are spoken in sub-Saharan Africa, and it is estimate that 10 per cent of them will disappear during the course of the next century. India, the US, Brazil, Indonesia and Mexico are nations with great linguistic diversity, but also have the largest number of endangered languages.

In France, 13 languages are severely endangered, 8 definitely endangered and 5 considered unsafe.

However, the situation of languages is not equally dire worldwide. For example, Papua New Guinea, the most linguistically diverse with over 800 languages believed to be spoken there, has 88 – relatively few – endangered languages.

Some languages classified as extinct, including Cornish in the United Kingdom and Sîshëë in New Caledonia, are being actively revitalized and could potentially become living languages again.

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