

Preservation of endangered languages world-wide

Background

Language is not just a sum of grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics. It expresses the culture, customs and values of the community. When considered in the context of indigenous communities, it is closely connected with the topic of freedom, human and indigenous people rights and equality and inclusion.

Currently there are around 7000 spoken languages worldwide, with approx. 6700 of them being indigenous. Despite the undoubtable importance of languages, approximately 3000 of them could disappear before the end of the century, according to the UNESCO¹. Exactly those are the endangered languages, defined by the UNESCO as *languages whose speakers have disappeared or shifted to another language – usually the main language of a dominant group*.

To ensure that languages on the verge of extinction are preserved, several organisations are taking steps. Apart from the UN, NGOs such as Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages are working on documenting, researching and teaching indigenous languages, as well as providing necessary resources, technology and support to indigenous language speakers.

UN involvement

Being alarmed by the jeopardy many indigenous languages face, the UN stepped in. In 2019, the UN celebrated the International Year of Indigenous Languages to draw attention to the problem.

One of the most important outcomes of this project was the Los Pinos Declaration signed in Mexico in 2020. It emphasizes the right of indigenous peoples to preserve, revitalize and promote their languages and provides possible solutions in the areas of education (by making education and learning materials accessible in indigenous languages) and public life (academia, offices, courts). It also suggests that modern technologies could play a crucial role in language preservation.

As this did not suffice, the International Decade of Indigenous Languages was proclaimed in the Resolution adopted by the General Assembly in February 2022. In accordance with this resolution, UNESCO oversees coordination of the efforts to protect threatened languages worldwide and urges member States to provide fundings and strategies to preserve indigenous languages.

¹ <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2022/02/21/a-decade-to-prevent-the-disappearance-of-3000-languages/>

Questions to consider

What is the situation in my country? What has my country already done and what was the result?

How could technologies help to preserve endangered languages? What tools could be used?

How to popularize indigenous languages?

What can educational facilities do about language extinction? How can schools and education help?

How to make institutions and services accessible to speakers of indigenous languages?

Are there any areas researchers should focus on?

Resources

- <http://news.unm.edu/news/saving-a-language-preserving-a-culture> - an article on the reasons why indigenous languages are so vital
- <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/712/20/PDF/N2271220.pdf?OpenElement> – a Resolution adopted by the UN including clauses on language preservation
- <https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2022/02/21/a-decade-to-prevent-the-disappearance-of-3000-languages/> - overview of the efforts of the UNESCO to ameliorate the situation
- https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/upcoming-decade-indigenous-languages-2022-2032-focus-indigenous-language-users-human-rights?TSPD_101_R0=080713870fab20005227c80e2b4518675ff8d5ac57be4b741d092e1f446838c903bed0283cbdd2b208e2260b9c1430007e23e704fd9e7ca2c5cdd2ecee30a307d81345052e759c90ee7d9095100f4dfe978ac23a909e18d6431b1aefed2104e – more on Decade of Indigenous Languages
- https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/los_pinos_declaration_170720_en.pdf - Los Pinos Declaration
- <https://en.iyil2019.org> – the official website of the Year of Indigenous Languages
- <https://livingtongues.org> – NGO that fights language extinction
- <https://toppandigital.com/us/blog-usa/technology-preserve-endangered-languages/> - an article on how technology could help
- <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/4-ways-we-can-support-endangered-languages/> - an article on how to prevent language extinction on a smaller scale