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**WORLD** □

# **Dying languages: scientists fret as one disappears every 14 days**

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**“There are ways to recover,  
say tomato seeds, but  
language is an oral medium . .  
. it is gone if direct speakers  
are dead and nothing has  
been done to document it.”**

KEREN RICE  
LINGUISTICS PROFESSOR

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When Ouma Aenki Kassie, a wrinkled elderly woman, died in Upington, South Africa, she left a rare and endangered language teetering on the edge of extinction.

Kassie, who died in January, was one of the last speakers of the N|uu language, listed as “critically endangered” by UNESCO. With her death, there are perhaps seven people in the world who speak N|uu.

Seven.

As many as half of the world's 7,000 languages are expected to be extinct by the end of this century; it is estimated that one language dies out every 14 days.

Endangered languages, much like endangered species of plants or animals, are on the brink of extinction. According to UNESCO, a language is endangered when parents are no longer teaching it

to their children and it is no longer being used in everyday life.

A language is considered nearly extinct when it is spoken by only a few elderly native speakers.

Like N|uu.

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**It is a huge loss** every time a language dies, says Ewa Czaykowska-Higgins, a professor in linguistics at the University of Victoria in British Columbia.

A language defines a people, a culture.

“Languages hold a world of knowledge,” she says. “We lose knowledge and history and lose connection to a land (when a language is lost).”

Songs, stories, words and expressions — developed over many generations — are also lost. Each language is a unique way of talking to the world, about the world.

Some of the 7,000 languages in the world today have hundreds of millions of speakers — English, Mandarin, Spanish and Arabic, for example — while others have barely a handful left. UNESCO lists a total of 577 languages as critically endangered. And these dying languages are in every corner of the world — Asia, Africa, North America, Australia and South America.

Countries with the greatest linguistic diversity are usually also the ones with the most endangered languages.

The death of languages, however, isn't an overnight phenomenon.

Communities are continuously switching to politically and economically more powerful languages.

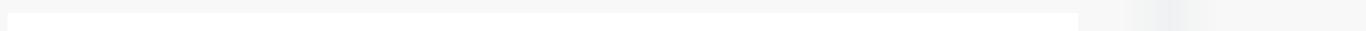
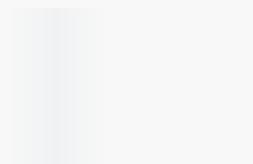
But globalization and colonization have also played a role, says Czaykowska-Higgins. Some communities would have had no choice but to give up their languages, she says.

In Soviet Russia in the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, many communities were forced to send their children to schools where Russian was the only medium of instruction.

Unless there is documentation, such as sound recordings, languages are gone forever, says Keren Rice, a professor of linguistics at the University of Toronto.

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“There are ways to recover, say tomato seeds, but language is an oral medium . . . it is gone if direct speakers are dead and nothing has been done to document it,” she says.

**While it is true** that hundreds of languages have died in past decades, communities are trying to revitalize those on the brink.

Rice says new methods are being used around the world to preserve dying tongues.

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Linguists are trying to learn as much about disappearing languages as possible. They create audiotapes, videotapes and written records so that, even if the language disappears, all knowledge of it will not vanish.

Other languages are being revived. One of the most dramatic stories is that of modern Hebrew, according to the [Linguistic Society of America](#). It was revived after being learned and studied only in its ancient written form for centuries.

Another feel-good story is from New Zealand, where Maori communities have established nursery schools staffed by elders. Called “language nests,” they are conducted completely in Maori.

Last year, Google launched the [Endangered Languages Project](#) aimed at helping preserve languages that are at risk of extinction. Its goal is to compile up-to-date information about endangered languages and share the latest research about them.

However, even as researchers take extraordinary efforts to revive and restore rare languages, dominant languages are racing ahead, acquiring hundreds of thousands of new speakers.

So are we heading to a world where English or Spanish will be the most spoken language?

Linguists are loath to speculate.

“Yes, languages disappear but other languages develop, too,” says Rice, adding it’s tough to say which one will be most spoken.

“English may dominate,” she says. “But in many places, you find real strength in local languages.”

### ***UNESCO’S five levels of language risk:***

**Safe:** Widely spoken

**Vulnerable:** Not spoken by children outside the home (600 languages)

**Definitely endangered:** Children not speaking (646

languages)

**Severely endangered:** Only spoken by oldest generations (527 languages)

**Critically endangered:**  Spoken by only a few members of the oldest generation, often semi-speakers (577 languages)

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