

2019 is UN's International Year of Indigenous Languages. And we need it to be

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Linguists warn against the death of half the world's languages by the end of this century.

Today, 28th of January 2019, the [International Year of Indigenous Languages](#) [7] (IYIL) will begin. And there are good reasons to spread awareness about the state of the world's indigenous languages.

As linguists, we are all too familiar with the depressing statistics surrounding indigenous languages. As is summarized on websites like [Ethnologue](#) [8], around 4,000 of the approximately 7,000 languages of the world are spoken by a mere two percent of the world's population. The eight most spoken languages globally (a little over 0.01 percent of all languages) are spoken by no less than 40 percent of the people inhabiting our planet.

It is estimated that half of the world's languages will be extinct by the end of this century, but so far no action has been taken against this on a global scale.

How and why do languages disappear?

Many people do not particularly care about the fact that languages become extinct, because, the thinking goes, they did not stand the test of time, and so people switch to a more practical language. In that regard, the extinction of languages is largely comparable to the extinction of animal species.

Some people are saddened by the fact that animals die out, but others might say that this is just natural selection. This is however not always true: Although countless animal species have indeed become extinct as a result of natural selection, the rate at which they are currently dying out is unprecedented compared to the time before homo sapiens got a foothold in the animal kingdom.

With languages, this is actually not entirely different. Sometimes people say that the extinction of languages is the result of natural selection, but this is not true. It is in fact humans who cause language extinction.

Languages can go extinct within a few generations

One cause of language extinction is genocide, such as what happened when European settlers exterminated the entire Tasmanian population and their languages along with it. Usually, however, languages die out because a group of speakers of a certain tongue is pressured into integrating into another, more dominant, group.

Think, for instance, about situations like annexation of a territory, social pressure from a high-prestige community, government-driven education policies, etc. People are subsequently forced to switch to another language.

As a result, new generations are born into a community where this language is no longer spoken, and so the language is not passed on to them. Indeed, language extinction can occur within the span of just two generations.

How 'safe' from extinction a language appears to be is largely dependent on the status of its speaker community as compared to other communities. Factors that play a part include the size of the community and its territory, the economic and social status of the speaker community, and the extent to which they are able to fend for themselves in daily life without any external aids.

Needless to say, this has little to do with natural selection.

Forbidden languages

Being forced to learn another, more dominant, language does not necessarily result in the extinction of a native language. In Greenland, for example, which has been part of the Kingdom of Denmark since 1814, Danish is taught alongside the native language, Kalaallisut.

Yet, in many cases languages and their speakers suffer a different fate. In Turkey, the use of Kurdish in schools and media was [until recently forbidden by law](#) [9], and, despite some promising [signs of increased tolerance](#) [10], lacks any significant status.

Another example is Basque, the use of which was at some point completely forbidden under Franco's regime. And there are many other cases of languages slowly dying out as a consequence of policy and ideology.

As linguists, we regularly witness this type of gradual language extinction, where one language is pushed out at the cost of another.

Willemsen, for example, conducted field research into a Papuan language called Reta spoken in Eastern Indonesia. Here, national policy dictates that the use of any other language besides Indonesian is forbidden in school.

Of course it is of importance for a nation that as many people as possible speak the national language, but the rigidity of this policy does push smaller languages out, and has also caused many speakers of smaller, local languages to feel oppressed.

For instance, in [this clip](#) [11] you can hear how members of the Abui clan, near-neighbors of Reta, talk about how they experience their own language being driven out at the cost of Indonesian. It is, as these examples show, simply not always the case that people are actually allowed to use their mother tongue on an everyday basis.

We need more language tolerance

It is uplifting that the UN is currently making an effort to create awareness about indigenous languages and about the impending and irreversible loss of linguistic diversity that the world is about to face.

Encouraging language diversity stands for tolerance, which is all too often lacking. A reason for this lack is that outsiders simply have a poor understanding of indigenous languages, which are often perceived as 'lesser' ways of speaking.

And if something is poorly understood, there is a risk it will be seen as backward and unworthy.

This lack of tolerance hits somewhat closer to home if you consider the way some tend to talk about 'modern' use of an existing language-use. Speakers of African-American Vernacular English, for instance, have long been considered as speaking an uneducated and plainly 'wrong' variety of American English, while in fact it bolsters many complexities that American English does not have.

And we do not even have to travel far to find people taking issue with the way certain subcultures use language. Opinion sections of Danish newspapers regularly present passionate obituaries as to how 'correct' language is dying at the hands of lazy youngsters and their sloppy speech.

Indeed, unless you actually understand that street slang tends to have its own grammatical rules just like a national language does, it will always seem uneducated. Likewise, indigenous languages tend to display fascinating and intricate grammatical systems that work in fundamentally different ways.

It is activities like those promoted by IYIL that help create awareness about, and tolerance towards, indigenous languages and cultures.

Not all language decline is coerced

While the types of cases illustrated above highlight the darker side of language attitude, linguistic policy, and the oppression it may result in, it should be noted that not every case of a language declining in number of speakers goes hand-in-hand with intolerance and coercion.

In many cases, a community might simply shift to another language for reasons of prestige or even practicality, and not feel very strongly about this.

A speaker of Dahalo once told the famous British phonetician Peter Ladefoged that he was proud that his sons had been to school and now only spoke Swahili and no Dahalo. This was a sign that he managed to break loose from the confinements of village life, enabling him to become successful.

Ladefoged, initially thinking his work would help preserve the language, concluded 'Who am I to say that he was wrong?'

In our own fieldwork, we have encountered similar language attitudes. While Reta (Willemsen) and Crucian (Bøegh) speakers are generally proud of their language on a community level, Indonesian and Standard American English offer many economic opportunities and are the respective prestige languages of these communities. Consequently, our sentiments about their traditional forms of speech slowly vanishing are mainly shared by a subset of older speakers.

Simply put, if speakers of endangered languages themselves see no reason to keep their language alive, it probably will not stay alive either. And there is no point in revitalizing a language if the speakers themselves do not see the point: Any effort to keep a language alive should come from the speaker community itself.

Yet, as we pointed out above, many languages and their speakers are in fact being oppressed, be it through language attitudes or through policies. Therefore, the International Year of Indigenous Languages is a welcome initiative for speakers of indigenous languages, as it can foster tolerance towards other languages by creating awareness and mobilizes people and institutions to take action for indigenous languages and cultures.

And beside the revitalization of these languages, there are myriad motivations for researching and documenting them. In a forthcoming article here at ScienceNordic, you can read more about how and why we study minority languages

The [official IYIL kick-off event](#) [12] will take place today, January 28th, in Paris.

[Read this article in Danish](#)[13] at *ForskerZonen*, part of *Videnskab.dk*

* This sentence 'In Turkey, the use of Kurdish in schools and media was until recently forbidden by law, and, despite some promising signs of increased tolerance, lacks any significant status.' originally read 'In Turkey, for instance, the use of Kurdish in media and in the school system is forbidden by law, and as a result, their language driven out at the cost of Turkish'. We thank Onur Y?ld?r?m from Columbia University for pointing out that our initial error.

 [In Indonesia, speakers of indigenous languages are often pressured by national policies into speaking the official language. This can threaten the existence of minority languages. \(Photo: Shutterstock\)](#) [14]
 [shutterstock_738221860.jpg](#) [15]

Fact box

[The International Year of Indigenous Languages](#) [7] is an initiative by the United Nations and is organised by UNESCO. United Nations International Years, which are [organized annually](#) [16], serve to create awareness for issues with immediate worldwide importance and mobilize people and institutions to take action for a certain cause.

Already in 2016 did the UN decide that 2019 would be the year of indigenous languages because these languages that are currently dying out at record speed.

[Brazil: A country without a language](#) [17] [What can linguistics tell us about the Vikings in England?](#) [18]
[Children do not automatically learn a second language](#) [19]
[Jeroen Willemsen's profile \(Aarhus University\)](#) [20] [Kristoffer Friis Bøegh's profile \(Aarhus University\)](#) [21]

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