

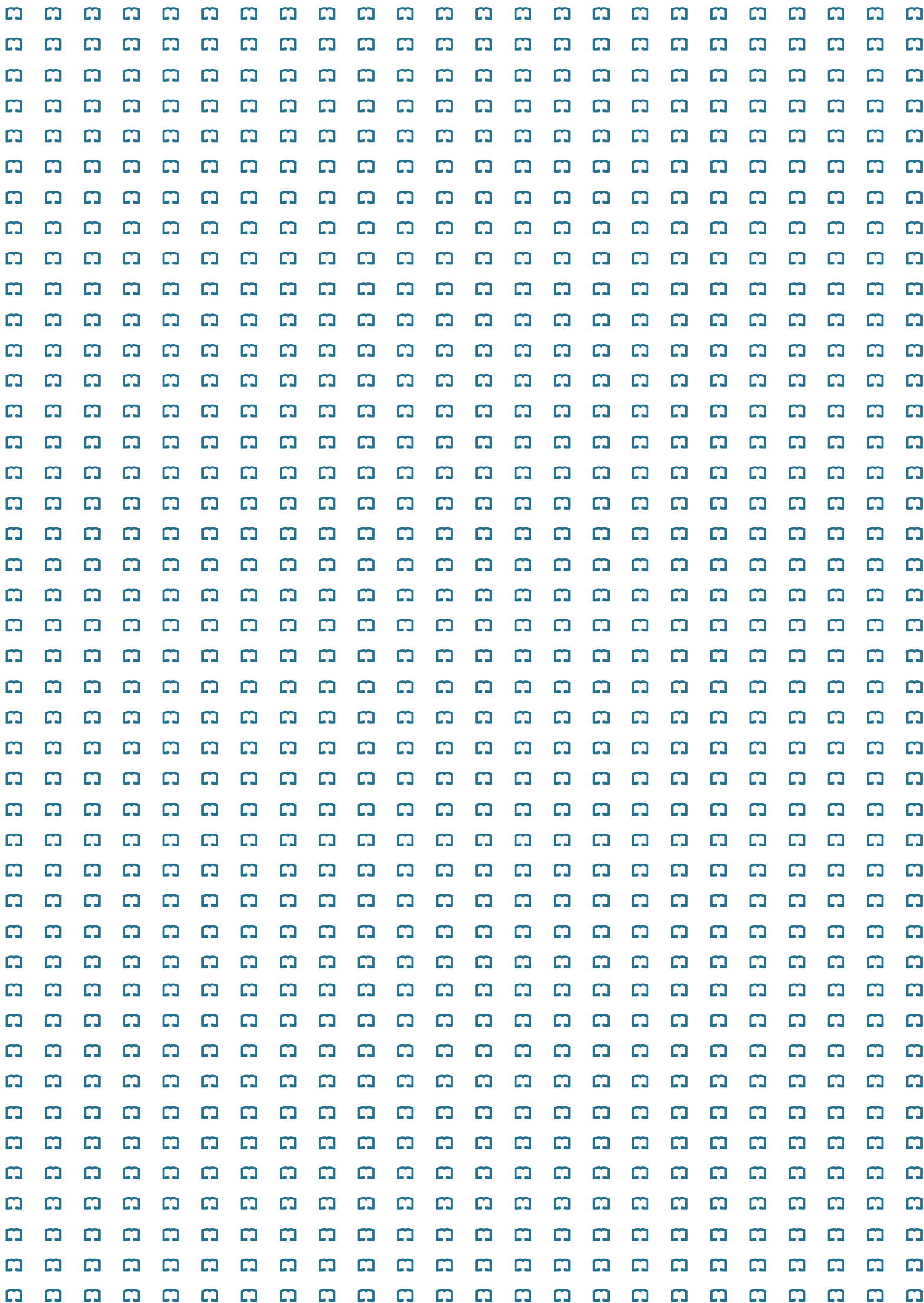
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THE UNESCO ATLAS OF THE WORLD'S LANGUAGES  
IN DANGER: CONTEXT AND PROCESS

*Christopher Moseley*



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WORLD ORAL LITERATURE PROJECT

University of Cambridge  
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology  
Downing Street  
Cambridge  
CB2 3DZ  
United Kingdom

email: [oralliteratureproject@gmail.com](mailto:oralliteratureproject@gmail.com)

office phone: +44 (0)1223 333504

[www.oralliterature.org](http://www.oralliterature.org)

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Will Stewart and Jack Sadler

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## PREFACE

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The World Oral Literature Project is an urgent global initiative to document and disseminate endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record.

Established at the University of Cambridge in 2009 and co-located at Yale University since 2011, the World Oral Literature Project collaborates with local communities to document their own oral cultures and traditional knowledge, and aspires to become a permanent centre for the appreciation and preservation of oral literature.

Through our series of Occasional Papers, we support the publication of research findings and methodological considerations that relate to scholarship on endangered languages and cultures. Hosted for free on our website, and printed on demand at the University of Cambridge, our series allows scholars to disseminate their research findings through a streamlined, peer-review process. We welcome expressions of interest from any scholar seeking to publish original work.

As our fifth Occasional Paper, we are delighted to present Christopher Moseley's reflections on UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, the most recent version of which he edited. In a candid discussion that draws on the differences between the print and online editions, Moseley addresses the many editorial decisions and challenges that he faced in the compilation process and demonstrates the enduring importance of language mapping for scholars, speech communities and the wider public.

Dr Mark Turin  
World Oral Literature Project  
University of Cambridge & Yale University  
June 2012

# THE UNESCO ATLAS OF THE WORLD'S LANGUAGES IN DANGER: CONTEXT AND PROCESS

Christopher Moseley

## INTRODUCTION

As General Editor of the third edition of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, I came to an already-existing project that had been evolving and expanding over two editions, but had yet to truly encompass the whole world. The opportunity to keep continuously abreast of the threats to the world's weaker languages was created by providing an additional version of the Atlas, accessible online for the first time through the UNESCO website, with an option for users to submit comments and suggestions for amendments and corrections to the more comprehensive data provided in this third edition. In this paper, I retrace the Atlas back to its origins and explain the process of expanding its coverage and enhancing its accessibility to the interested lay user.

## ORIGIN AND GENESIS OF THE UNESCO ATLAS

Linguistic geography is a relatively new branch of linguistics. In the past, the mapping of languages was chiefly concerned with the microcosms of individual languages: dialect maps, for instance, or the charting of isoglosses. The geographical plotting of speech communities on a worldwide scale is a comparatively new phenomenon. Can linguistic geography, in presenting the synchronic and diachronic struggle for survival and ascendancy among the world's languages, be an agent of change; a spur to greater awareness of diversity and action to reverse the encroachment of larger languages on smaller ones? It is only in the past three decades that enough data has been amassed to assess the true nature of the threat; and only more recently has it been possible to draw some general conclusions about the nature of the challenge. Well-documented languages may be preserved in some form beyond the death of their last speakers, but for the vast numbers of purely oral languages that remain without comprehensive documentation, the mapping of their common plight may act as a spur to action.

UNESCO has now existed for sixty years, and in that time its focus has shifted somewhat from a concern for material heritage to an active campaign to preserve the less tangible aspects of human culture. The concept of 'language endangerment' as a field of study is much younger, having really only burgeoned in the past twenty years. The idea that the diversity of the world's languages needs to be protected and requires intervention is younger than the idea that species of flora and fauna need safeguarding. UNESCO has a whole section devoted to Intangible Heritage—active since the signing of the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003—but it was perhaps as a result of the international concern for biological diversity that the concept of the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* was really fostered. By monitoring the threat to minority languages in the member states of UNESCO, the Atlas aims to urge those members to act in keeping with the organisation's aims of ensuring mother-tongue based multilingual education; promoting cultural diversity and inter-cultural dialogue; and supporting a free and pluralistic mass media.

How does UNESCO define language endangerment? What situation does a language have to be in to gain a place in its Atlas? The simplest definition of endangerment is that a language is endangered when children no longer learn it. But to define endangerment more precisely, a number of factors have to be considered:

- *Absolute number of speakers*
- *Intergenerational language transmission*
- *Proportion of speakers within the total population*
- *Community members' attitudes toward their own language*
- *Availability of materials for language education and literacy*
- *Shifts in domains of language use*
- *Response to new domains and media*
- *Type and quality of documentation*



• *Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and use*

UNESCO is also concerned with linguistic rights as human rights, and there are now a number of widely ratified standard-setting instruments, including the convention on intangible heritage cited above, that ensure the right to education in one's mother tongue, the right to publish in the language of one's choice, equitable access to state funding and so on. Some of these acts are binding, such as the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights,<sup>1</sup> while others are non-binding declarations, such as the International Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>2</sup>

The organs of the United Nations (UN) can only operate through securing international agreements and by carrying out the programmes of action that are enshrined in these conventions and agreements. As far as endangered languages are concerned, the UN engages in programmes of awareness-raising, capacity-building, and monitoring status and trends.

It is at this point that the present Atlas comes in, for it grew out of the sense of finiteness of resources which gave rise to the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (United Nations), signed at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro that year. As a response to that summit, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) released *The IUCN Red List of Endangered Species*,<sup>3</sup> which established a grading of degrees of endangerment of species that is much like those used in our present Atlas. Biological diversity and linguistic diversity may appear to be fundamentally different things, but the concern for each of them is motivated by a similar assumption: that diversity in itself is a positive factor that enhances the quality of life on Earth and the human environment, and above all that it is within mankind's power to control the forces of homogenisation and extermination of the weaker or less 'fit' species and languages. The primary aim of this Atlas, then, is to provide indicators on the status and trends of linguistic diversity and numbers of speakers of indigenous languages.

The UNESCO Atlas developed out of the concept of

the 'Red List', which was originally designed to provide a worldwide alert to the loss of biological diversity. Linguists and anthropologists were also beginning to notice a parallel between the losses sustained by nature and the losses sustained by human culture. In the same year as the Rio Summit, the International Congress of Linguists (CIPL) met in Quebec, Canada, and formed an Endangered Languages Committee, resulting in a further meeting in Paris under the auspices of UNESCO. The previous editor of this UNESCO Atlas, Stephen Wurm, created an International Clearing House for Endangered Languages, based in Tokyo, which published the *Red Book of Endangered Languages*, the forerunner to this Atlas, in 1994. As an organisation concerned with both science and culture, it naturally fell to UNESCO to take up the call to safeguard cultural as well as biological diversity. The first two editions of this Atlas, in 1996 and 2001 respectively, were issued in book form with an accompanying set of printed maps, but they did not cover the whole world. These earlier editions only aimed to provide data about some representative areas of the world where the threat to the smaller indigenous languages was most acute.

The first edition, published in 1996 under the general editorship of Stephen Wurm, Professor at the Australian National University, listed 600 languages that were considered endangered, and comprised of 53 pages of text and 12 maps. The second edition, in 2001, was also edited by Stephen Wurm, and completed just before he died. For both of these editions, Wurm gathered around him an international team of experts who described the regional situations in texts to accompany each map and plotted the positions of the endangered languages using a colour-coded system which is still used, albeit in a modified manner, in the third edition. In the second edition, the number of languages listed as endangered was increased to 800, and there were 90 pages of text and 14 maps. But it was still not complete and comprehensive.

Thanks to generous funding from the Government of Norway, it was possible to expand the project in several ways for the third edition. It has appeared for the first time in two forms: a digital, online version that is accessible through the UNESCO website, and a printed edition. The digital version was launched in Paris in February 2009, to coincide with International Mother Tongue Day. The English print edition appeared a year later, along with the printed Spanish and French translations (Fig. 1).

One important advantage of such a dual approach is that now that the Atlas is accessible to more users by means of the Internet, any faults or errors of omission or commission can be more easily rectified and incorporated in the gradually-evolving online edition, with any resulting amendments slated for inclusion in future print editions.

<sup>1</sup> The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) has been in force since 1976, and was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 16 December 1988. It currently has 74 signatories. See <[www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b3aa0.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b3aa0.html)>. Accessed on 25 May 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The International Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 13 September 2007, and is not currently binding under international law.

<sup>3</sup> See IUCN website <[www.iucnredlist.org/](http://www.iucnredlist.org/)>. Accessed on 25 May 2012.

### THE CURRENT EDITION: DIGITAL AND PRINT

The scope of the Atlas is now greatly extended to include 2,500 languages, which is probably more than a third of all the languages spoken in the world. Since languages are dying at the rate of at least one every few weeks, the editorial team has decided to include some recently extinct tongues among these. Approximately 230 of the languages included have been extinct since 1950; in other words, the lifetime of UNESCO, or two generations of language-losers.

The process and technique of mapping itself has changed profoundly since the 2001 edition. Previously, the printed maps were simply flat outline maps in a single colour, drawn to the appropriate scale for each respective region but with no topographical detail and few indicators of towns or other landmarks. The new maps are based on Google technology. The Atlas is still not overloaded with geographical detail, because it is important not to distract the user from appreciating the actual location of a language. But a degree of topographical detail, as well as the opportunity to zoom in and out to different scales, all help the user to easily find their bearings and situate languages in their wider geographical context.

In the online version of the Atlas, it is possible to select a language by clicking on its symbol, and to view the associated data that has been made available about each individual language: its main name, its alternative names if any, and its International Organization for Standardization (ISO) code. The ISO 639-3 code (1997) is a single three-letter code assigned to each language in the world that has been recognised as a separate language. 'Recognised as a separate language' is an important criterion here because, on the one hand, one language may have many names, which might also refer to dialects of it; and on the other hand, several languages might share one name. A code distinguishes its separate identity. These codes were not devised by UNESCO; they are the property of the International Standards Organization, but they are most often associated with the Ethnologue (SIL International 2009) listing of all the world's known languages,<sup>4</sup> which is regularly brought up to date by its publisher. Other details shown here are numbers of speakers, relevant policies and projects, and sources of information; as well, of course, as the geographical co-ordinates. What the online Atlas does not show is affiliation within a language family. Such information is best explained in the text, as some cases may involve quite complex hierarchies that cannot easily be shown in a confined space and also remain contested and challenged by linguists.

It is of course very important that users have an opportunity to offer feedback, some of which will lead to changes in the information provided about the languages in the Atlas. To that end, a 'Comments' field has been made available in

the data-tab for each individual language entry (Fig. 2). After a rigorous editorial checking process, the changes will initially be shown in the digital edition, and then later will be incorporated in subsequent print editions. The print edition is distributed in most countries through government stationery offices, the offices of the UN representative, or directly from UNESCO in Paris.

Feedback comments are received electronically by UNESCO's section for Intangible Heritage (latterly its separate section for Endangered Languages), and, after checking, are passed on to the General Editor, who then confers as necessary with regional consultant experts and provides a ruling on whether an amendment is indeed necessary, after which it is incorporated.

### ARRANGEMENT OF THE ATLAS

For the third edition of the Atlas (Fig. 3), the world was divided into regions that were more or less continental in scope, and the editors for each section worked on the maps and provided the text.<sup>5</sup> The project had a web editor in Paris at the UNESCO headquarters, who allowed password access to each editor to plot the position of each language on their own map and to provide the accompanying information. The languages were then indexed and grouped by country in alphabetical order, so that the user can scroll down a list for each country (and a language may appear under more than one country) to locate a particular language in the online version, or consult the index of the printed version. The information was also checked against available ISO codes. In some cases the regional experts had to disagree with the codes given, either because they applied too widely to a group of separate languages or too narrowly to misidentified languages or dialects. The team continues to contribute corrections in this way to the official code list. In

<sup>4</sup> Ethnologue: Languages of the World (2009) is available in both digital and print editions. Its 16th edition was published in 2009. See <[www.ethnologue.com/web.asp](http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp)>. Accessed on 28 May 2012.

<sup>5</sup> The regional editors, who act as consultants on any further amendments, were chosen for their known expertise on the endangered languages of particular regions. They are: Matthias Brenzinger & Herman Batibo (Sub-Saharan Africa); Salem Mezhoud (North Africa and the Middle East); Tapani Salminen & Tjeerd de Graaf (Europe and the Caucasus); Hakim Elnazarov (western and central Asia); Juha Janhunen (north-east Asia); Jean Robert Opgenort and Stuart Blackburn (India and the Himalayan Chain); David Bradley (south-east Asia and southern China, Taiwan); Darrell Tryon (Greater Pacific region); Michael Walsh (Australia); Willem Adelaar (eastern South America); Marleen Haboud (Andean South America); Yolanda Lastra (Mexico and Central America); Lyle Campbell (United States) and Mary Jane Norris (Canada).

some cases, new codes are needed, while in others, some old codes need to be reassigned.

In relation to mapping, it is important to point out that in this Atlas, languages are shown by points, not by polygons (Fig. 4). Each language point is of a single standard size. The reason is clear: very small points could easily be lost; very large points, measured by numbers of speakers, would crowd out the smaller points. Also, since we are not mapping stable or unthreatened languages at all, we cannot use polygons—shapes representing the actual area where a language is spoken—because they would border onto nothing. They would raise as many questions as they would answer. We therefore faced the challenge of placing the standard point in the most central location for each language. If the speakers are scattered over a wide area, this presents a further problem, and if there are other languages in between, we have to use several points, but we have tried to be sparing with such ‘multi-pointing’. Such a policy must be applied judiciously if the speakers are nomadic, for instance. For mobile communities, all that we can do is to provide a minimum number of representative points.

The difference between approaches to mapping methods is apparent if one compares a page of the UNESCO Atlas with a page from the Routledge *Atlas of the World's Languages* (Asher & Moseley, 2007), which uses polygons and treats all languages equally, and in which all blank spaces indicate uninhabited places. By way of illustration, we can compare the treatments of northern South America in the UNESCO Atlas with the Routledge one, which shows both Time of Contact (the presumed distribution of languages at the time of first contact with the European conquerors) and the contemporary situation (Figs. 5–7).

The points marking the locations of the languages themselves are in a range of colours, and the colours indicate the degree of endangerment. For more information on this, please see ‘Degrees of endangerment’ below, and the UNESCO Atlas website.<sup>6</sup> There has been much discussion about these terms, and they have changed slightly since the second edition. Generally, the set of categories has been retained from previous editions. The term ‘extinct’ is the most controversial. There are, of course, languages whose last native speaker has died, maybe even several generations ago, and yet there are second-language speakers who are consciously reviving the language and claim it as part of their ancestry. We have chosen to add categories for ‘revived’ and ‘revitalised’ languages, and this has already been implemented in the digital edition. There was much discussion among the contributing editors about the terms we should use. Terms such as ‘moribund’ and ‘dormant’ were discussed, and in fact moribund was a term used in descriptions in the previous editions. But ‘moribund’ seemed to imply ‘heading for inevitable extinction’, which was not an impression our team wanted to create. And ‘dormant’ is a term with a lot to recommend it, but there is no precise way

of gauging when a language emerges from the dormant state. ‘Revived’ is a term used for languages that had been dormant, so to speak—without any living native speakers—and have been brought back from this state; whereas ‘revitalised’ is used where a process of attrition has been halted and reversed.

## DEGREES OF ENDANGERMENT

Generally speaking, language endangerment can be classified in terms of generations of users. Each map and section of accompanying text in all three editions was the work of an acknowledged specialist on the languages of the region, and I was appointed as General Editor to co-ordinate the task. In all three editions, we have graded each language with a colour-code according to the level of danger it faces (Fig. 8):

**Safe** if the language is spoken by all generations. The inter-generational transmission of the language is uninterrupted. Such languages are therefore not found in the Atlas and not shown in the database or publication.

**Stable yet threatened** if the language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken transmission, although multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant languages has taken over certain contexts. Such languages are not usually in the Atlas, but in the future they may be, and our editorial panel must monitor them.

**Vulnerable** if most children or families of a particular community speak their parental language as a first language, even if only in the home.

**Definitely endangered** if the language is no longer learned as the mother tongue or taught in the home. The youngest speakers are of the parental generation.

**Severely endangered** if the language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; the parental generation may still understand it but will not pass it on to their children.

**Critically endangered** if the youngest speakers are of the great-grandparents’ generation, and the language is not used every day. These older people may only partially remember it and have no partners for communication.

**Extinct** if no one speaks or remembers the language. The editors decided to include such languages if they have fallen out of use in the past sixty years, approximately the lifetime of UNESCO itself. Of all the categories, this one has become the most controversial.

<sup>6</sup> Homepage of the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger <<http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/>>. Accessed on 26 April 2012.

These categories were made more explicit for users of the third edition (2009). It was therefore important to set up a mechanism to deal with feedback to the editors, if a user finds some data that is wrong or open to dispute, or that an important language is omitted.

### FEEDBACK AND CONTROVERSY

The phase of work that the Atlas is now engaged in is a particularly interesting one. UNESCO has commissioned the Foundation for Endangered Languages to monitor and process the feedback from users of the online edition. The feedback has been continuously received for over two years now (2012), since the launch of the online version, and the submissions have now settled down to a steady trickle after an initial flourish of curiosity and enthusiasm. Initially, comments arrived at a rate of several per day; they now arrive at the rate of a couple a week. The work of checking the accuracy of the claims and counter-claims for possible amendments to the Atlas is rigorous, and therefore slow and painstaking. The suggestions from users can be broadly categorised as covering the following areas:

- *Location of the markers*
- *Status on the endangerment scale*
- *Population figures and speaker numbers*
- *Classification as a language: further up or down the hierarchy? Is the speech form a language or dialect?*
- *Additional bibliographic sources, especially new learning materials*
- *Personal anecdotes about contact or identification with the speakers*
- *Ethno-political policy statements (usually from representatives of minorities struggling for greater recognition of their rights)*
- *General questions about UNESCO criteria*

How do we deal with such feedback? The Foundation for Endangered Languages, in taking on the role of processing the feedback and adapting it for future use, appointed a set of regional consultants. Broadly speaking, they are the same as those who edited each section of the Atlas. What one must remember here is that the online and print versions of the Atlas are not two identical manifestations of the same thing; rather they have qualitative and substantive differences. On the one hand, there is no text accompanying the maps in the online version. On the other, data on each language is more extensive in the online version: geographical co-ordinates, alternative names, known or estimated speaker numbers are to be found for each individual entry. Bibliographical references are also provided. These differences mean that those who make comments on the data on individual languages in the online version are reacting to information that

is unique to that edition, which includes data on individual mapped languages, but without the benefit of a contextual review of the whole region and its endangered languages. Those who have the static, printed version, which must await another edition to be amended, are able to read the accompanying text about each region. Online users would not send some of the more general questions as feedback if they were aware of the context and the criteria used for including certain languages and excluding others, and for considering language varieties within what might be considered a dialect continuum.

It has been our policy not to include dialects, if the variety is undisputed as a dialect. Some complaints have concerned over-zealous splitting of a set of dialect varieties into separate languages. But so often, since endangered languages tend to be precisely those that are not standardised and not codified, they reside along a continuum where the speakers at one end cannot comprehend speakers at the other.

Queries about additional material, bibliographic or otherwise, for inclusion in the data on a particular language are encouraged by UNESCO, but the sources quoted will preferably be primary as far as possible. Primary citations can be difficult and contentious where newly described languages are concerned. For instance, Wikipedia is often quoted as a source for information about a language; sometimes it seems to be almost the only source. The editorial team has recently had to make a ruling about this: Wikipedia articles cannot be included in the bibliography, although we can include the articles that they recommend and to which they refer. Wikipedia is a democratic medium, offering everyone the freedom to edit. UNESCO cannot afford to be so democratic as to invite direct amendment of entries by users. As sources of information, UNESCO and Wikipedia are not comparable: with the UNESCO Atlas, each suggested amendment goes through an elaborate validation process. First an amendment is passed on to the relevant regional consultant editor, who may or may not recommend further action. Their recommendations are then passed back to me as General Editor, and we pass the signal for final validation on to UNESCO, usually in the form of words chosen by the consultant.

While this work is now going on in a steady and orderly manner, the work in revising the Atlas started off with a sudden jolt, as soon as the online edition was released, in February 2009. Controversy started immediately, and it came from Britain, although the launch was at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. Since then, most of the controversies about this Atlas have been about languages in western Europe. To begin, the specific objections came from activists for the Cornish and Manx languages, which our European regional editor had labelled as extinct. As explained above,

the levels of endangerment in this edition had been taken over from the two earlier editions, and I soon realised that, at the more critical end, the gradations are something of a blunt instrument with which to evaluate and grade languages. Many British readers will be aware of the language situations in Cornwall and the Isle of Man. The last native speaker of Cornish as a first language is supposed to have been Dolly Pentreath, who died in 1777 (Berresford Ellis, 1974), but there were rumours of isolated cases of tiny numbers of speakers surviving into the nineteenth century. In the case of Manx, the language survived until much more recently, with the last speaker of Manx as a first language dying only in 1974 (Stowell & Breaslain, 1996). But both of these languages had been codified—they had a long and traceable written history—which made it possible to revive them. There are guardians of these languages alive and active today, and they are proud and zealous defenders of their speech traditions.

After these initial critiques, there followed a discussion between our regional editors, our commissioning editors at UNESCO and myself, and we resolved that the new categories ‘revitalised’ and ‘revived’ should be offered.

#### WHEN IS A LANGUAGE DEAD?

The question of extinction is not a straightforward one. A huge number of languages must have lived and died hitherto without any acknowledgement from the outside world. Is a language such as Latin, that is no longer spoken but is well documented, considered extinct?

A language that is no longer spoken is usually considered to be extinct; since most languages have never been written, extinction is usually irreversible. It may be possible to revive extinct languages, provided that there is adequate documentation and a strong motivation within the ethnic community. The most dramatic case of reversal of fortunes for a spoken language in modern times is Hebrew, which was always a canonical, codified language, venerated as the vehicle of Scripture, but which extended its domains greatly when adopted as the state language of Israel. Cornish and Manx were revived more recently but are not yet taught to children as a mother tongue. Ancient written languages such as Aramaic, Latin or Greek, or the English of Chaucer’s time, remain accessible through texts.

A large proportion of the comments received in feedback to the online Atlas consist of attestations of literacy programmes beginning in languages that had not previously been recorded as written. This is encouraging, of course, but in itself it is not proof of the future sustained life of a language. Literacy programmes in small indigenous languages generally do not start spontaneously at the grassroots level, because they must be preceded by the adoption of an

agreed orthography, and that orthography will most usually be based on that of the most influential or familiar metropolitan language.

A written language has even fewer guarantees of sustainability than a spoken one. A new orthography can only be kept alive by usage and practice; and it may even have to be adjusted to better fit the contrastive phonology of the language.

The linguists who edited the third edition of the Atlas agreed that it should include not only languages that are endangered, but also those that have become extinct in the last half-century. When we say that a language is extinct, we mean that it is no longer the first tongue that infants learn in their homes, and that the last speaker to learn the language in that way has passed on within the last five decades. Half a century—the lifetime of UNESCO itself—is the rule of thumb for inclusion of ‘extinct’ languages, therefore, because it is the span of two generations. In that short time, a language can be lost completely from a state of healthy transmission.

It may be possible to revive extinct languages, provided that there is adequate documentation and a strong motivation within the ethnic community. In many communities, revitalisation efforts begin when there are still elders alive who learned the language as infants, even if there is often a gap of several generations of non-speakers in between. There are more and more examples of languages being brought back to life, even if many linguists still wish to distinguish such revived languages from those that have been spoken continuously, without interruption.<sup>7</sup> There are also extraordinary cases, such as Livonian in Latvia, where the last speaker was believed to have died in 2009, but a 101-year-old speaker, still fluent after many decades of exile, has been discovered living in an old people’s home in Toronto.<sup>8</sup>

#### LANGUAGE, DIALECT AND VARIATION

Controversy is not only about extinction, but also arises at the other end of the scale, when a language is described as ‘vulnerable’. As with the more extreme cases of endangerment, so the less extreme cases that caused most debate tended to be centred on Europe. A case in point is Bavarian, which has been included in the Atlas, to represent that distinct variety of German spoken in the south, around Munich, and on into Austria. We have received expressions of outrage from users—not that Bavarian is recognised as

<sup>7</sup> Several languages of Australia and of North America, even poorly documented ones, are now being taught to new generations of learners after a hiatus of one or more generations. For examples of such languages see Evans (2009), and Hinton & Hale (2001).

<sup>8</sup> As recounted in the film by the Estonian director Vahur Laipea in (2011), and by Valts Ernštreits in his doctoral dissertation (2011).



a separate language, but rather that it is considered to be in any danger at all. But let me quote from the editor of the European section in his accompanying text:

*'German consists of Thuringian, Upper Saxon and Silesian, so that not only Low Saxon but also Limburgian-Riparian, Moselle Franconian (which covers Luxembourgish), Rhenish Franconian and East Franconian as well as Alemannic and Bavarian are recognised as regional languages. None of the regional languages are particularly endangered but they all continue to be spoken in a diglossic situation with the national languages' (Salminen, 2010: 37).*

Please note the carefully chosen phrase 'regional languages': the Atlas does not use the term 'variety' or 'dialect' here. The difference between a language and dialect remains complex and contested, and the question is often raised. It remains difficult to apply an apparently objective criterion such as 'percentage of mutual intelligibility' alone to this emotive issue, if, as in the case of Germany, but also in the cases of Italy and France, a dual language use situation with the national language exists. Comments from concerned users about German languages were couched in even more emotive terms, and reflected the domains of use and numbers of speakers. Our regional editor's point, in including these languages at the 'vulnerable' end of the scale, is that the domains of use and speaker numbers are showing signs of shrinking, under pressure from a central standardising and homogenising influence. This applies even to the relatively safe, but taxonomically controversial, case of Bavarian—widely spoken as a distinct variety, without enjoying official status as a written language, and part of a continuum that includes less prestigious spoken varieties.

Is it a badge of honour for a language to be included in the Atlas, or rather one of shame? National governments, or national commissions to UNESCO, have not been lodging complaints with our team. Institutional comments have come rarely, and where they have, they have been from grass-roots organisations trying to promote a language that has been included in the Atlas. And since these are 'bottom-up' organisations, they welcome the wake-up call to national governments that is implied in the Atlas; namely, to take measures to safeguard their language. Not all language advocates will necessarily welcome the inclusion of their language in the Atlas, but most of them do acknowledge the importance of the recognition that this implies.

#### WHO COMMENTS ON THE ATLAS?

Comments from users have not been received uniformly from all over the world. There is a definite preponderance

of comments from Europe and about European languages. Quite a few also concern languages of southern and south-east Asia and South America. Relatively little has come in about North American indigenous languages, and virtually none at all about West Africa or China, despite the large number of endangered languages that we have logged in those areas. What conclusions are we, the editorial team, supposed to draw from this disparity?

Does this simply mean that our European editor tends to divide up language varieties more finely than other editors have done? That remains one possibility, but it does not explain everything, as all regional editors adhere to the same basic criteria. Does such variation imply that comments come only from academics in computer-literate communities with easy access to the Internet and fluency in the languages in which we operate: English, French and Spanish? We have had comments in other major languages of Europe too, but none in languages from outside Europe. That is another very plausible possibility.

Alternatively, do the different response rates say something about the whole concept of endangerment? Is 'endangerment' still largely a white man's concept, perhaps not so important in lands that are inherently multilingual? If one is used to a hierarchy of languages in different domains of life, why should one see a reason to try to subvert or overthrow such plurilingualism? It may be the natural order, after all.

To sum up, I believe that the overall pattern of feedback to the Atlas is not particularly surprising. One other important factor that has already been mentioned is the fact that online users have not had access to the accompanying text. This can be a serious disadvantage, especially where criticism of our team's underlying criteria for including a language is involved, but it is UNESCO policy as a publisher to provide the text only in the printed edition. The online users see the result, but are not privy to the reasoning that led to the inclusion of a language. At the moment there are no plans to include the text chapters in the digital version.

#### MULTILINGUALISM AND ENDANGERMENT

Multilingualism remains the commonest state of mankind in terms of language use. While it may be becoming less common, the homogenising effects of globalisation have not yet eradicated it. Transferring from two languages to only one is, of course, a subtle process that is hard to measure. The disappearance of a language is like the disappearance of life-giving water sources: in a generation, a lake or river can be reduced to a series of water holes, then puddles, after which it may dry up completely. But is this process necessarily irreversible?

Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Cameroon are home to

numerous languages, but not particularly severe endangerment levels. It is wrong to suppose, as a monolingual English, French, Spanish or Russian speaker may be tempted to do, that a small language is necessarily an endangered one. Numerous factors co-exist to ensure the continued use of ever-smaller languages:

- *Mother-tongue education*
- *Agreed domains of use outside the home*
- *Infrastructural support, or at least benign tolerance and respect*
- *Use in media (in print, on air and online)*
- *Agreed orthography*

Intricate hierarchies may develop in multilingual societies, where the language of the market is a pragmatic choice, given that trade and international or intercultural communication require it, but the need for the language in quotidian life is limited.

What about newly discovered languages? It would be gratifying to report that our consultants have brought to light some totally new discoveries. To some extent this is true. In 2010, the Living Tongues Institute was accorded publicity after the apparent discovery of a language in north-east India called Koro.<sup>9</sup> This turned out to be not so much a new discovery as a reclassification, which only goes to show how little documented so many of the world's languages are. By the same token, the Atlas can make a similar claim. Last year Matthias Brenzinger, who is not only the UNESCO Consultant Editor for Sub-Saharan Africa but who also has great interest in Japan and Korea, made the discovery that the language of the island of Jeju off the coast of South Korea is substantially different from standard Korean. The Jeju language is definitely shrinking in its usage. Following extensive consultation with Korean linguists, we have made an amendment to our Atlas, and we now have one endangered language in the otherwise homogeneous Korean peninsula. This is a qualitatively different kind of reclassification or rediscovery. Korean is a very well-documented language, as are most of its varieties, and Jeju is not an isolated island cut off from the world—it even has its own university. The important thing to point out is the relative status toward the national language: Jeju was not officially acknowledged even in Korea, except by some scholars, as being a regional language with just as much claim to a distinct identity as, say, Bavarian in Germany or Venetian in Italy. In Asia, Jeju is not such a unique example: consider the case of Ryukyuan, which has emerged to become recognised as a distinct language from Japanese (though this does not mean that it is in every sense endangered).<sup>10</sup>

The Atlas can serve as a tool for a number of comparative activities that have not yet been systematically under-

taken. It is possible, for instance, to adjust the parameters and compare languages with similar numbers of speakers. But comparison with data from outside the Atlas would also prove useful. What correlation exists, for example, between the state of language endangerment and a range of other socioeconomic factors in any given country? Does deprivation of language rights and/or facilities match deprivation of opportunities in other spheres of life? How do the indigenous minority languages of a multi-ethnic nation relate to its education system, and when are local mother tongues used in school?

The fact that the Atlas project was sponsored by an organ of the United Nations means that the information that it contains is reliable and verifiable, and that its objectivity is beyond question. The consultants who work on this project are not bound by any national or political affiliation, and have no personal interest to gain from its findings. The users who send their feedback, however, may have all manner of affiliations and allegiances to sentiments other than those of objective linguistic science. The UNESCO editorial team has to strike a balance and seek out the evidence for all the claims that are made for and against the validity of those tiny pinpoints on the map.

This Atlas remains an ongoing project, as long as UNESCO has the means to support it. Within the UN family, Endangered Languages is now a separate section distinct from Intangible Heritage, the body that oversaw the first two editions and initiated the third edition.

## THE FUTURE

The UNESCO Atlas will prove to be a useful compendium as long as it is kept up to date with changes in the language endangerment situation across the world. It is important that both forms of the Atlas continue, the print edition and the online resource, but with greater convergence, so that online users can read the text and benefit from the reasoning and theories that lie behind the editors' choices. It is also important that users continue to take an active and critical interest in improving the Atlas; and most important

<sup>9</sup> As reported by Living Tongues <[www.livingtongues.org](http://www.livingtongues.org)>, and in the National Geographic magazine <[www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com)> news item on 5 October 2010. Both accessed on 26 March 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Ryukyuan (or Okinawan, as shown in the Atlas) has developed over centuries in isolation as a distinct language from Japanese, but its distinctness has been underplayed by Japanese administrations in the interest of national unity and sovereignty in a strategically sensitive area. Recently, however, through the efforts of bodies such as the Ryukyuan Language Heritage Society, it has come to be seen as a distinct language in its own right.

of all, that we as a team of editorial consultant linguists will be able to continue perfecting it. The fourth print edition may adopt some new features, and the online version is also under constant review. The online Atlas continues to be popular: between mid-February and mid-March 2012, UNESCO recorded over 17,000 visitor hits to the online version. Users seem generally satisfied with the presentation of the data; comments are mostly restricted to the data itself and the inclusion or exclusion of specific languages.

It is particularly gratifying when the Atlas is used by non-linguists, as a basis for comparison with other factors in studies of human culture, geography and demography. And what of the comparison with biological degradation, the very issue that spurred the Red List into existence in the first place? The scope for comparison between the loss of diversity in natural and human worlds seems limitless. A detailed comparison of those two realms, between the 'S' (Scientific) and the 'C' (Cultural) of UNESCO, is only now becoming possible.

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## INTERNET SOURCES

- [www.ethnologue.com/web.asp](http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp)  
[www.iucnredlist.org/](http://www.iucnredlist.org/)  
[www.livingtongues.org](http://www.livingtongues.org)  
[www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com)  
[www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/](http://www.unesco.org/culture/languages-atlas/)  
[www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b3aa0.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b3aa0.html)



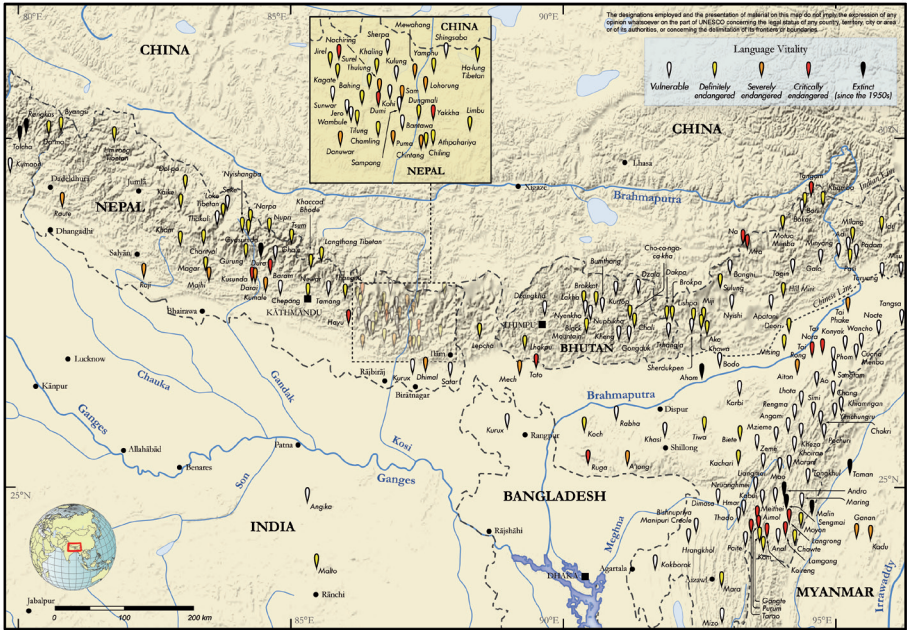


Fig. 1. Endangered languages of the central Himalayan Chain. Source: Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (print edition, 2010). © UNESCO

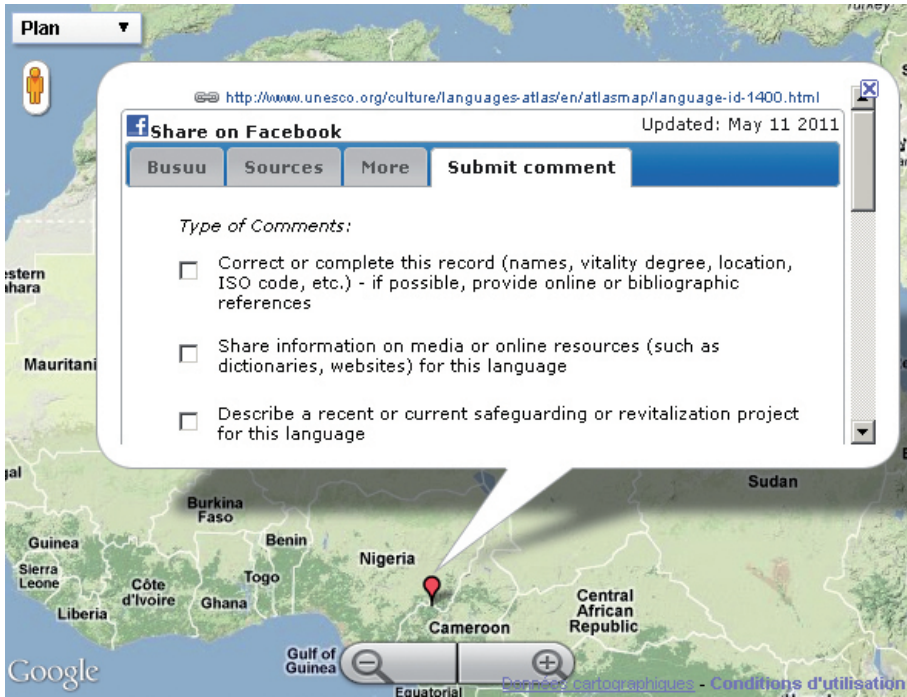


Fig. 2. An image from the UNESCO online atlas with a tab for users' suggestions, questions and feedback. © UNESCO



Fig. 3. The Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger cover. Source: Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger (print edition, 2010). © UNESCO

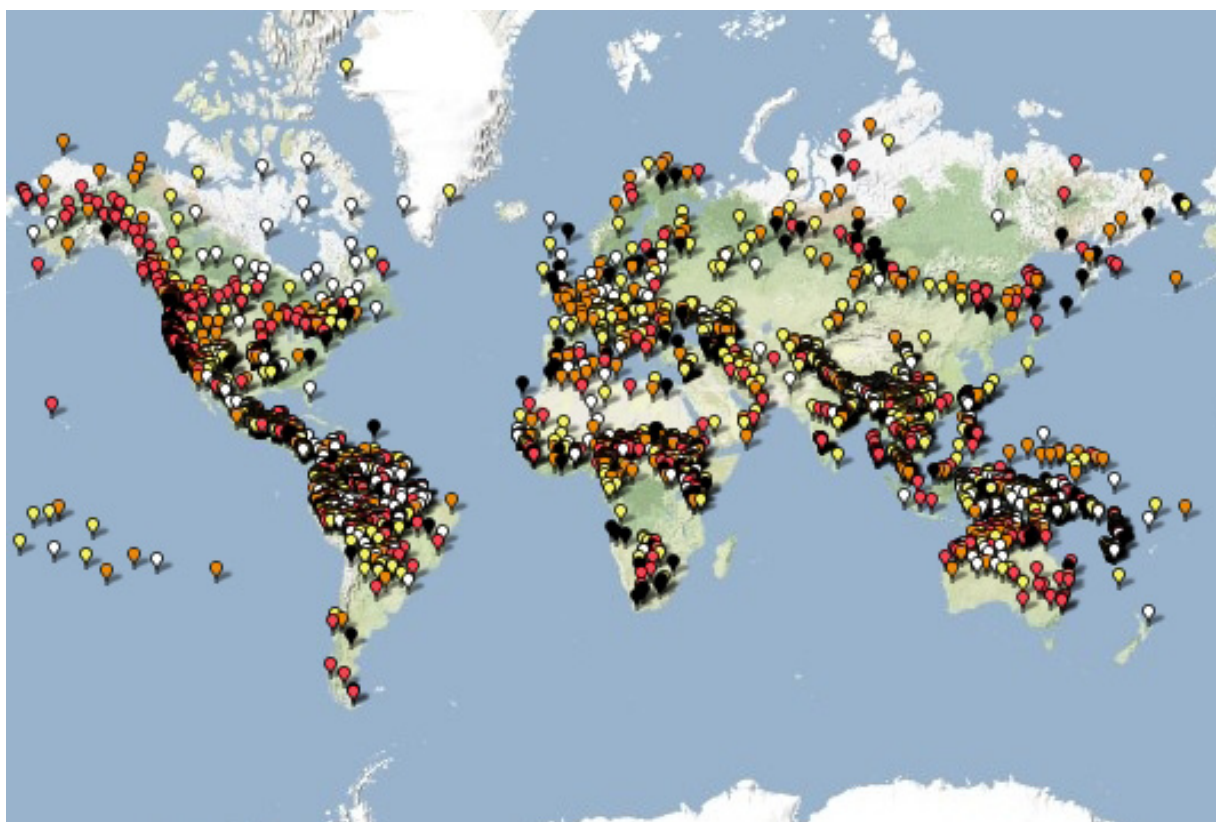


Fig. 4. The UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger lists over 2400 languages in danger of disappearing. © Google/© UNESCO







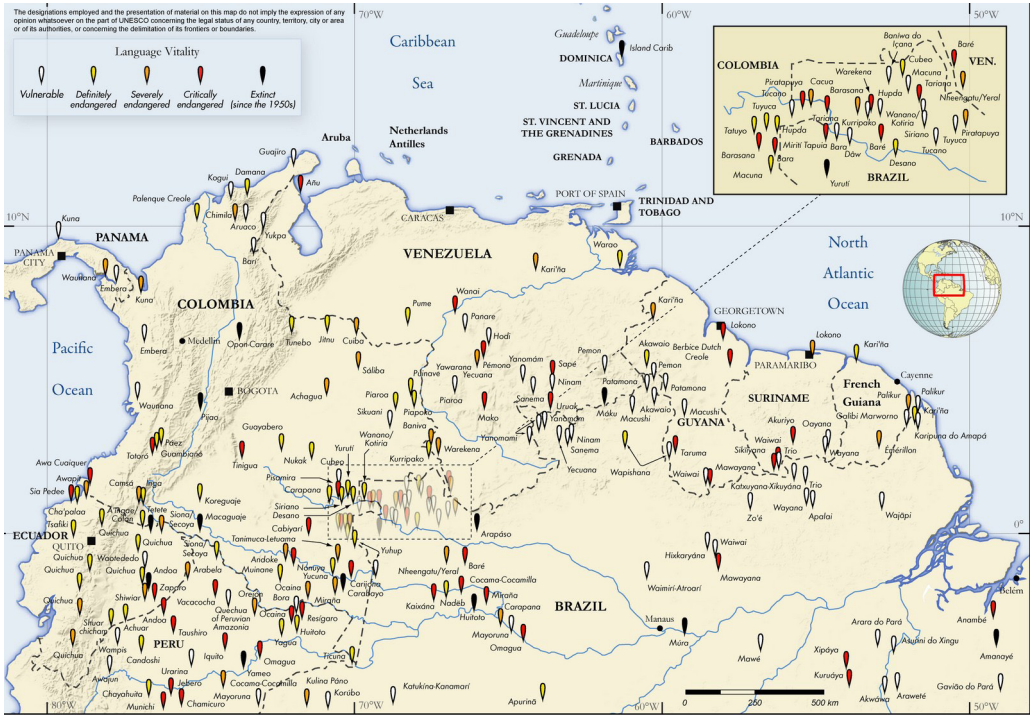


Fig. 7. Map: Northern South America from *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (print edition, 2010). © UNESCO

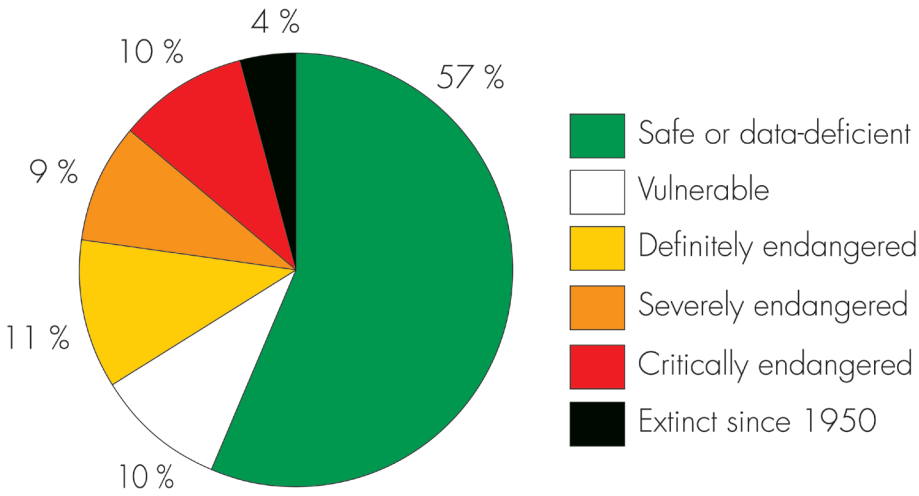
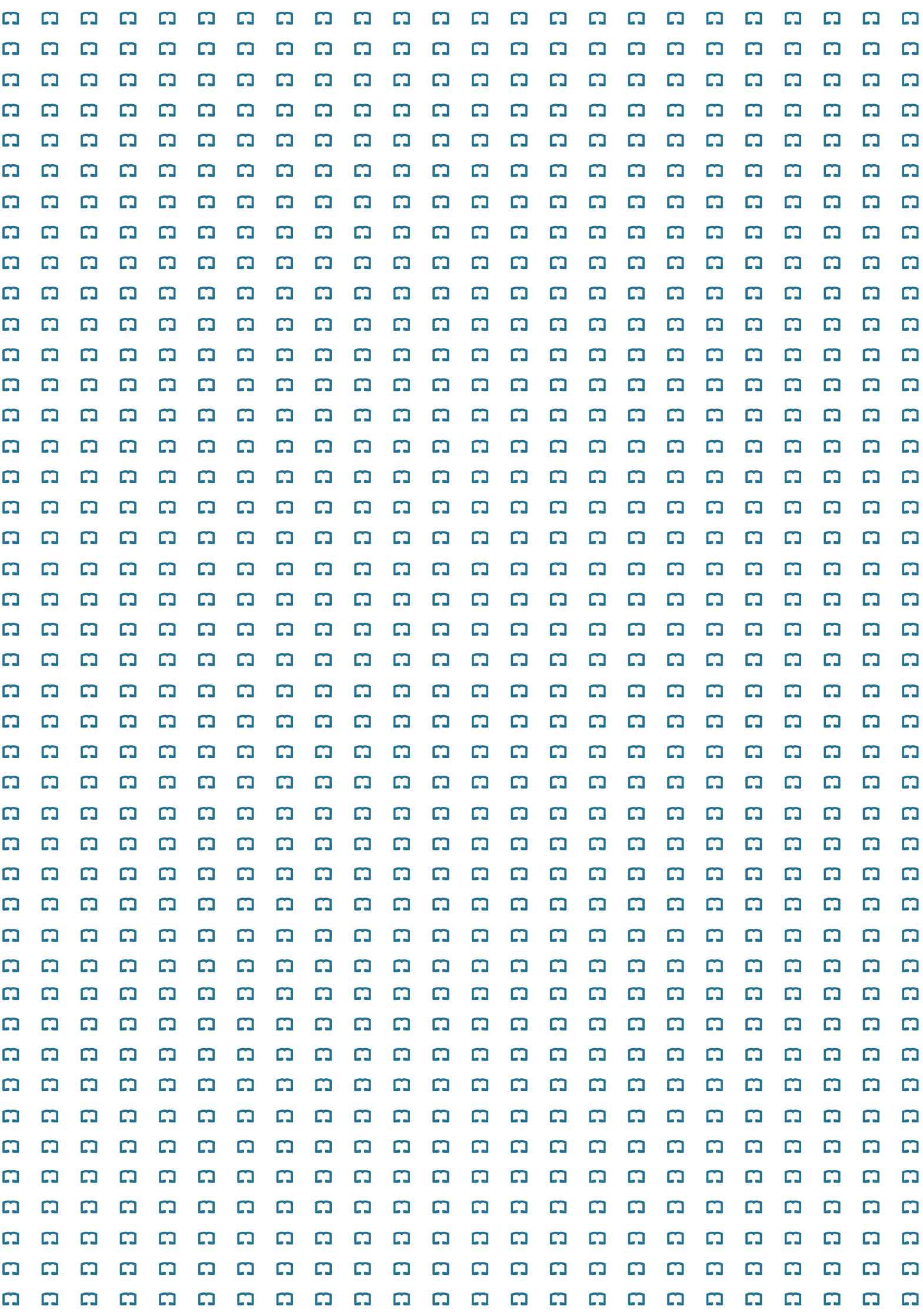


Fig. 8. World's languages by degree of vitality according to the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 2010. © UNESCO







## ABSTRACT

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As General Editor of the third edition of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, I came to an already-existing project that had been evolving and expanding over two editions, but had yet to truly encompass the whole world. The opportunity to keep continuously abreast of the threats to the world's weaker languages was created by providing an additional version of the Atlas, accessible online for the first time through the UNESCO website, with an option for users to submit comments and suggestions for amendments and corrections to the more comprehensive data provided in the third edition. In this paper, I retrace the UNESCO Atlas back to its origins and explain the process of expanding its coverage and enhancing its accessibility to the lay interested user. Important questions are raised regarding the convergence of online and print editions of the Atlas; continuing response to feedback from online users; and the ways in which UNESCO can keep up to date with changes in the language endangerment situation across the world.

Christopher Moseley is General Editor of the third edition of the UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (2010). Alongside linguistic geography, his research interests are in newly written languages and the creation of orthographies to suit them. Moseley completed his Master's degree in Baltic-Finnic linguistics and his doctoral research in linguistics at the University College London (UCL) School of Slavonic and East European Studies. He has held posts at BBC Monitoring (a branch of the World Service); as Teaching Fellow in Latvian at the Language Centre at UCL; as a freelance translator and editor; and as Treasurer for the Foundation of Endangered Languages. Moseley also co-edited the second edition of the *Routledge Atlas of the World's Languages* (2007).