

## **FAVOR Project: The UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger**

*by Christopher Moseley, General Editor*

Imagine that your entire primary and secondary education had been in a language that is not the one you use at home. Maybe that has been your experience – and if you are an immigrant, it is quite likely to be.

But what if your education had been in an alien language – in your own country? And if your parents and grandparents before you had had the same experience? And in your daily life everywhere outside the home – not just in school but in the market, the church, the newspapers, the Internet – your interactions with everyone were in a language that was not your own? If that is your experience, then you are likely to be part of an **indigenous linguistic minority**.

And it is also likely that you are having a harder time maintaining your language than your parents or your grandparents did before you. For millions of people around the world, this is a daily reality.

Until just a generation ago, there was no real way of knowing just how widespread a phenomenon this process of **language attrition** is, all over the world. Languages faded quietly away, often unrecorded by anyone, growing ever weaker from one generation to the next. It was only when the problem of the world's decreasing **biological diversity** made natural scientists join forces around the world (such as at the Rio Summit in 1992) that linguistic scientists were prompted to notice that the same thing was happening with the world's spoken linguistic heritage, and to take action to do something about it. Linguists felt that ordinary people's attitudes need to change to make it possible to halt and reverse the process of losing language diversity everywhere.

And it had only recently become possible to join the dots – to see the connections and the common factors that were driving small languages out of daily use all over the world. Linguistic geography – the science of mapping the world's languages – was still in its infancy. And so was the concept of **language endangerment**. Just as it had done with biological diversity, UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation – decided to step in.

It started with publishing a **Red Book** – modelled on the idea of the published catalogue of endangered natural species of flora and fauna. This became an Atlas in 1996, and the first edition, with a few maps,

provided a snapshot of the locations of the languages that were most severely in danger in certain parts of the world with big concentrations of minority languages. A second and bigger edition appeared in 2001. And since 2009, we have a third edition, which is much bigger still in its coverage.

What is new in this edition of the Atlas?

This third edition of the Atlas is new in at least three important ways. Firstly and most obviously, it is being published in two different formats: an on-line version as well as a printed version. The on-line version is an important new development, and is based on Google Earth maps, with the location of each endangered language, no matter how small, pinpointed as exactly as possible on the maps, which can be filtered to any desired scale and level of detail. Secondly, for the first time we are giving a comprehensive coverage of the whole world. The previous two editions gave only a sample from some continents of the state of threatened languages, but this time we have been careful to cover every language, and, as before, to show the level of endangerment, from “Unsafe” down to “Moribund” with a system of colour coding. And thirdly, we are making the Atlas available in three languages: English, French and Spanish, with possibly more translations to come later.

But throughout history, languages have born and disappeared, so why do we have to care about this?

We as human beings should care about this in the same way as we should care about the loss of the world’s variety of plants and animals, its biodiversity. What is unique about present-day language revival movements, which didn’t exist before, is that linguists are for the first time aware of just how many languages there are in the world, and are coming to a better understanding of the forces that are attacking them and exterminating them, and of ways to control those forces. It’s very difficult and complex, and it would be naïve and oversimplifying to say that the big ex-colonial languages, English, or French or Spanish, are the killers, and all smaller languages are the victims. It is not like that; there is a subtle interplay of forces, and this Atlas will help ordinary people to understand those forces better.

But to answer in one sentence: why do we have to care? Because each language is a uniquely structured world of thought, with its own associations, metaphors, ways of thinking, vocabulary, sound system

and grammar – all working together in a marvellous architectural structure, which is so fragile that it could easily be lost forever.

But what projects or initiatives are there that have helped to safeguard a language?

Projects and initiatives exist at all levels – from local grassroots campaigns from the bottom up to get people to read in their own language and thus pass it on to younger generations, up to big state-supported plans. In Australia, for instance, there are active and successful campaigns to revive the use of languages that were regarded as dead for generations, but turned out to be only ‘sleeping’. In New Zealand, the Maori language has been rescued from near oblivion through the scheme of ‘language nests’ – nurseries where the language is passed on to young children. But the biggest success stories are the ones that are operated with state support and infrastructure, such as the reclaiming of Welsh in Wales or Catalan in Catalonia – two regions of Europe that have seen success in our own lifetimes – or, of course, the revival of Hebrew as a national language in Israel.

So what has it taken to put this Atlas together?

It was a worldwide collaborative effort by a team of linguists, all of them experts in the field of endangered languages and linguistics. As in the previous editions, we had Regional Editors in charge of collecting data for each continent, writing the regional essays for the Atlas, and entering the language points in the maps. For some areas, local knowledge of the situation came from specialists in several countries. Of course the contributors needed help and guidance from technical experts at the Section for Intangible Heritage of UNESCO as well. The Web Editor from UNESCO provided help and guidance for the editors at every step of the way while the on-line version was being created, because this was a pioneering experiment for all of us; and meanwhile the commissioning editors and myself as general editor were overseeing the preparation of the texts for the print edition. The whole project of preparing the third print edition was done to a tight schedule, in just under a year from start to finish. But that was only the beginning. This time the project is ongoing, because the on-line version of the Atlas ([www.unesco.org/culture](http://www.unesco.org/culture) > follow the ‘Resources’ tab) is being constantly kept up to date through feedback from its users. If you have a comment to make about a small language that you know about, you too can submit your comment by following the instructions on the web-page.

