



CARTOGRAMS

# SPEAKING OUT

BY BENJAMIN HENNIG

There are approximately 7,000 languages believed to be spoken around the world. Despite this diversity, the majority of the world's population speaks only a fraction of them. The three largest language groups (Mandarin, Spanish, and English) have more than 1.5 billion native speakers. Other estimates state that two thirds of the world's population share only 12 languages.

But it is the diversity of the languages spoken by the few that makes language a remarkable cultural phenomenon.

It is estimated that 96 per cent of all languages are spoken by only three to four per cent of all people. Two thousand of the world's languages have less than 1,000 native speakers.

There are many attempts to understand and map this diversity of languages around the world. The Ethnologue database lists exactly 7,099 individual languages in a comprehensive geographic database. An even more detailed account when looking at the real diversity of language is provided by Glottolog of Germany's Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History. Glottolog 'aims to provide complete references on the world's languages'. It also looks at the distribution of dialects and consists of almost 8,500 entries. Besides detailed linguistic information, this database includes basic geographic information about the origins of languages, their families and their dialects.

The Glottolog database was used in this month's cartogram to highlight the geographic distribution of language diversity around the world. The main locations of each entry from the database were used to calculate the density (and diversity) of languages in their spatial distribution. The cartogram therefore shows larger areas where there is a relatively higher diversity of languages. This is also reflected in the differently shaded colours overlaid.

The highest language diversity in the world can be found in Africa and Asia, both with more than 2,000 living tongues. At the other end of the geographic spectrum lies Europe with only around 250 living languages and dialects spoken.

How vulnerable languages are can be seen even in Europe, with its relatively low language diversity. As a tool to monitor the status of endangered languages and the trends in linguistic diversity at the global level, UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (found online at [www.unesco.org/languages-atlas](http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas)) lists 11 languages in the UK alone that have a certain degree of endangerment. Most critically endangered are Cornish and Manx on the Isle of Man, two of 14 languages in Europe with this most severe status. Both are now subject to revival efforts.

The authors of the *Handbook of Endangered Languages* estimate that by the end of the century, 50 to 90 per cent of the currently spoken languages could be extinct. First affected will be the approximately 500 already nearly extinct languages that often only have a few (sometimes even only one) known speakers left. Endangered languages face similar fates as endangered species in nature.

Such highly endangered examples include the Bishuo language in Cameroon for which there was only one known

native speaker left in the last records. In North America, many of the nearly extinct languages are to be found among the native populations along the west coast. One is Klallam, for which there were still five speakers recorded in the 1990 Census, but which is now regarded as extinct, with its last native speaker having died in 2014. Only a few second-language speakers remain.

Efforts such as the Endangered Languages Project ([www.endangeredlanguages.com](http://www.endangeredlanguages.com)) aim to utilise the internet in efforts to raise awareness for endangered languages and work towards the future preservation of today's language diversity. For the most part though, it's up to communities themselves to fight to keep their native tongues alive.

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• For more on endangered languages, visit [geog.gr/gaelic\\_oh](http://geog.gr/gaelic_oh) to read Mark Rowe's in-depth examination of the battle to reinvigorate the use of Scottish Gaelic in the Outer Hebrides.