

Dying World Languages

More than half of the world's approximately 7,000 languages are facing likely extinction within the next 50 years. In fact, it is estimated that a language dies every two weeks. Even though many of these languages still have thousands of living speakers, the languages are not being passed down to the next generation. Linguists consider such languages to be "dying" since in the not-so-distant future, their last

native speaker will die and no one will be left to carry on the language.

National Geographic's Enduring Voices Project has studied this phenomenon in depth and has named Northern Australia, Central South America, Canada's Northwest Pacific Plateau, Eastern Siberia and the Southwest United States as the areas where indigenous languages are facing the greatest peril. Even



A language dies about every two weeks

here in the United States there are some 40 Native American languages still are spoken today in Oklahoma,
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Language Spotlight: Dutch

Dutch (*Nederlands*) is a Germanic language, like English, that has approximately 23 million speakers throughout the world, of which



Dutch is the closest cousin to English

16.8 million are in the Netherlands. It is also an official language in Belgium, Suriname, Aruba, Curaçao and Sint Maarten. The dialect of Dutch that is spoken in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, is known as Flemish (*Vlaams*).

Dutch is the closest cousin to English so most Americans find the language fairly easy to learn. Unlike German, Dutch has lost all of its grammatical cases and only

has two genders: common and neuter. However, just like German, Dutch often places verbs at the end of the sentence. Its vocabulary is principally made up of Germanic vocabulary though there are many English and French loan words.

The sound system is close to English, but a few sounds such as the trilled "r", the "sch" and the guttural "g" can be rather tricky to pronounce. 🇳🇱

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"To have another language is to possess a second soul." —Charlemagne

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Texas and New Mexico. There are many reasons why a language does not get passed down from one generation to another. However, in most cases it is due to the fact that the dominant language of the area gradually overtakes the minor language in school, at work and even at home to a point where the speakers of that language no longer bother or find it necessary to pass it along to their children.

In other cases, strict language policies of a region speed a language's demise in favor of the dominant language. Once a language is dead, it's unlikely to ever be revived. Hebrew is the only language to be successfully revitalized as a national language once it had lost all of its native speakers.



The question is often asked why anyone should care if a language disappears? The truth is that when a minor language dies and is subsequently replaced by a more dominant one, the world loses a piece of its cultural history, not that different from the extinction of an animal species. The culture of an entire people is tied to its language so more than just the language is being lost.

Since the majority of the dying languages are not written down, the oral traditions of thousands of years may be lost forever once the last speaker is gone. For this reason, linguists and cultural anthropologists are in a constant struggle to record the sounds, grammar and oral histories of as many of these languages as possible before it's too late.

No matter how widely spoken a language is, it is still vulnerable. A perfect example of this is Latin, which was a dominant language spoken throughout the Roman Empire for centuries, yet as the language spread throughout the region, it splintered into several different languages over time (Spanish, Portuguese, French, Romanian, Italian, etc.) and the mother language itself fell into disuse. Even though it is still learned by millions of students and used to a limited degree within the Catholic Church, there are no living native speakers of it and no practical need to learn to speak it. The lesson for us all is to be sure to pass along our native languages and cultures to our children so that they last. ☺



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The Language Corner



Whitney Ramsay, Education Director

A new feature is a regular *Question and Answer* forum on language and cultural issues.

How long does it take to learn a new language?

One question that I am frequently asked is how long it takes to learn a new language. The answer is not so simple because it really depends on a lot of different factors.

First, have you had any exposure to the language, or a similar one, in the past? How do you plan to use the language in the future, in casual conversation on vacation or professionally in your job?

Second, how much time you can dedicate to the language? Will you be able to attend class on a regular basis? Even if you're limited in how often you can come to class, are

you willing to spend plenty of time outside of class? Even when you are not in class, there are plenty of things you can do to stay in touch with the language.

Third, it depends on your age. While it is said that children pick up a second language easier and faster than adults do, adults have advantages, too. Think about the sheer volume of material an elementary school student covers in a year versus the sheer volume of material a college student covers in a year.

Fourth, it depends on your native language. For example, if you're a native English speaker, it will probably be easier for you to learn another language that uses the Latin alphabet (i.e. Spanish) as opposed to one that doesn't (i.e. Russian). And if you already know Spanish, for example, learning Italian or Portuguese will be much easier due to the similarity in vocabulary and grammar.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, it depends on your motivation to learn the language. It's amazing how learning a language for a significant other or recently-adopted child can motivate a student. So take a personal inventory. If you're still unsure how long it'll take you to learn a new language, try starting with one of our public group classes or our smallest package of private one-on-one class hours and re-assess once completed. No one can learn to speak a new language fluently in a matter of months, but you can certainly learn to use the language to get around, ask questions and interact with native speakers while you continue to improve your speaking ability. I think you'll be surprised at what you can accomplish!

If you have any questions about language learning, translation or world culture, please email me at wramsay@indyfla.com 📧

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