

How Languages Die

The Silent Extinction of Human Knowledge

Investigate why a language disappears every two weeks, what the world loses when it does, and whether dying languages ca...

B2 Reading · 35 min · Culture

1 Before You Read — Reflect & Discuss

Consider the following questions and discuss with a partner or your teacher:

1. How many languages do you speak? Have you ever tried to learn a language that very few people speak?
2. Do you think it matters if a language with only a handful of speakers disappears? Why or why not?
3. What would be lost if your own language ceased to exist — beyond the words themselves?

2 Reading

Voices Falling Silent: Why Languages Disappear and Why It Matters

There are approximately 7,000 languages spoken in the world today. By the end of this century, linguists estimate that between 50% and 90% of them will have disappeared. That means a language dies, on average, every two weeks — and with it vanishes an entire system of knowledge, culture, and identity that took thousands of years to develop. The scale of this loss is difficult to **comprehend**, yet it receives a fraction of the attention given to other forms of extinction. We mourn the loss of animal species and ancient forests, but the death of a language — an event that erases an irreplaceable way of understanding the world — often passes in silence.

What Does It Mean for a Language to Die?

A language is considered **endangered** when it is no longer being learned by children as a first language. It is considered **extinct** when its last fluent speaker dies. The progression from healthy to extinct can happen within a single generation. When parents decide — or are forced by social, economic, or political pressure — to raise their children in a **dominant** language rather than their

heritage language, the transmission chain that has sustained the language for centuries is broken. Without child speakers, a language has no future.

The causes of language death are varied but overwhelmingly **systemic**. Colonialism, forced assimilation, economic **marginalisation**, and the globalisation of media and education have all contributed to the dominance of a small number of world languages — primarily English, Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, and Hindi — at the expense of thousands of smaller ones. In many countries, speaking a minority language was historically punished: children were beaten in schools for using their mother tongue, indigenous communities were forcibly relocated, and languages were deliberately suppressed as instruments of cultural **erasure**.

What Is Lost When a Language Dies?

Each language represents a unique way of **encoding** human experience. Languages are not simply alternative labels for the same set of concepts — they structure thought, perception, and knowledge in fundamentally different ways. The Hopi language of Arizona has no **grammatical** tense system comparable to English; instead, it distinguishes between events that are manifest (observable) and events that are not yet manifest — a distinction that embeds a radically different understanding of time into everyday speech. The Kuuk Thaayorre people of Australia orient themselves using **cardinal** directions (north, south, east, west) rather than relative ones (left, right), resulting in extraordinary spatial awareness that speakers of European languages typically lack.

Beyond grammar, languages carry **ecological** knowledge accumulated over millennia. Indigenous languages often contain highly specific vocabulary for local plants, animals, weather patterns, and medicinal practices — knowledge that exists in no written scientific literature and that is permanently lost when the language disappears. Linguist K. David Harrison has argued that the world's endangered languages collectively contain more knowledge about the natural world than the sum of all Western scientific **databases**.

Can Dying Languages Be Saved?

Language **revitalisation** — the effort to restore endangered languages to active use — has achieved some remarkable successes. Hebrew, once a purely **liturgical** language with no native speakers, was revived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and is now spoken by over nine million people as a first language. Welsh, which was in serious decline in the 20th century, has been stabilised through bilingual education, media broadcasting, and government policy. Māori in New Zealand and Hawaiian in the United States have both benefited from immersion schools where children are taught entirely in the endangered language.

However, for many of the world's smallest languages — those with fewer than 1,000 speakers — revitalisation is a race against time. Documentation projects, in which linguists work with last speakers to record grammar, vocabulary, and oral **traditions**, can preserve a record of the language even if it ceases to be spoken. But a recorded language is not a living language. A

language truly lives only when it is spoken, adapted, and passed from one generation to the next.

A Question of Value

The loss of linguistic **diversity** is not merely an academic concern. It reflects — and reinforces — the marginalisation of the communities that speak these languages. When a language dies, its speakers lose a connection to their ancestors, their stories, and their identity. The world, in turn, loses a way of thinking, a body of knowledge, and a perspective that can never be recovered. Protecting linguistic diversity is not about **nostalgia** — it is about recognising that every language contains something that no other language can fully express, and that the loss of any one of them diminishes us all.

3 Key Vocabulary

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
comprehend	to understand something fully	The scale of language loss is difficult to comprehend.
endangered	at serious risk of extinction or disappearance	A language is endangered when children no longer learn it.
extinct	no longer existing; having no living representatives	A language is extinct when its last fluent speaker dies.
dominant	most powerful, important, or influential	Parents often choose to raise children in a dominant language.
heritage	valued traditions, culture, or history passed down through generations	Heritage languages are abandoned under social and economic pressure.
systemic	relating to or affecting an entire system rather than individual parts	The causes of language death are overwhelmingly systemic.
marginalisation	treatment of a group as insignificant or peripheral	Economic marginalisation pushes communities to abandon their languages.
erasure	the complete removal or destruction of something	Languages were deliberately suppressed as instruments of cultural erasure.
encoding	converting information into a particular form or system	Each language represents a unique way of encoding human experience.
grammatical	relating to the rules and structure of a language	The Hopi language has no grammatical tense system comparable to English.
cardinal	of fundamental importance; in geography, the four main compass points	Some cultures use cardinal directions instead of left and right.

Word / Phrase	Definition	Example Sentence
ecological	relating to the relationships between organisms and their environment	Indigenous languages carry ecological knowledge accumulated over millennia.
databases	structured collections of data held electronically	Endangered languages may contain more knowledge than all Western databases.
revitalisation	the process of bringing something back to life, health, or active use	Language revitalisation has achieved some remarkable successes.
liturgical	relating to public religious worship or ritual	Hebrew was once a purely liturgical language with no native speakers.
traditions	customs, beliefs, or practices passed from generation to generation	Documentation projects record grammar, vocabulary, and oral traditions.
diversity	the state of having a wide variety of different things	The loss of linguistic diversity reflects the marginalisation of communities.
nostalgia	a sentimental longing for the past	Protecting languages is not about nostalgia — it is about preserving knowledge.

4 Useful Collocations

endangered language · native speaker · mother tongue · cultural identity · language preservation · oral tradition · linguistic diversity · indigenous community · immersion school · bilingual education · language policy · cultural heritage · first language · language shift · minority language · knowledge system

5 Reading Comprehension

1. How frequently does a language die, according to the text?

- a) Once a year
- b) Approximately every two weeks ✓**
- c) Once a decade
- d) Every day

2. When is a language considered 'endangered'?

- a) When it has fewer than one million speakers
- b) When it is no longer being learned by children as a first language ✓**
- c) When it has no written form
- d) When it is spoken in only one country

3. What causes languages to die, according to the text?

- a) Natural evolution makes all languages eventually disappear
- b) Colonialism, forced assimilation, economic marginalisation, and globalisation of dominant languages ✓**
- c) Languages die only when their speakers move to other countries
- d) Government support for bilingual education

4. What does the example of the Hopi language illustrate?

- a) That some languages have no grammar
- b) That languages structure thought and perception in fundamentally different ways ✓**
- c) That English is the most complex language
- d) That all languages express time in the same way

5. What kind of knowledge do indigenous languages uniquely contain?

- a) Only religious knowledge
- b) Highly specific vocabulary for local ecology, medicine, and natural phenomena ✓**
- c) Only mathematical knowledge
- d) Knowledge that is already fully documented in Western science

6. Which language is given as an example of successful revitalisation?

- a) Latin
- b) Hebrew — revived from a liturgical language to one spoken by over nine million people ✓**
- c) Ancient Greek
- d) Sanskrit

7. Why does the text argue that protecting linguistic diversity matters?

- a) Because it increases tourism revenue
- b) Because every language contains irreplaceable knowledge, perspectives, and cultural identity ✓**
- c) Because the United Nations requires it
- d) Because languages with fewer speakers are easier to learn

6

Vocabulary Exercise — Fill in the Blanks

**endangered · dominant · systemic · marginalisation · erasure · encoding · ecological ·
revitalisation · diversity · nostalgia**

1. A language is considered _____ when children no longer learn it as their first language.
2. Parents often choose to raise children in a _____ language for economic and social reasons.
3. The causes of language death are not individual but deeply _____ — rooted in colonialism and globalisation.
4. Economic _____ pushes minority communities to abandon their heritage languages.
5. Languages were deliberately suppressed as tools of cultural _____.
6. Each language represents a unique way of _____ human experience and knowledge.
7. Indigenous languages contain _____ knowledge about local plants, animals, and medicinal practices.
8. Language _____ efforts like immersion schools and bilingual education have achieved some successes.
9. The loss of linguistic _____ impoverishes all of humanity, not just the affected communities.
10. Protecting endangered languages is not about _____ — it is about preserving irreplaceable knowledge.

7**Answer Key**

Vocabulary Exercise Answers

1. endangered
2. dominant
3. systemic
4. marginalisation
5. erasure
6. encoding
7. ecological
8. revitalisation
9. diversity
10. nostalgia

8

Grammar Focus — Key Structures in the Text

B2 Grammar: Present Simple for Facts, Contrast & Emphasis

Present simple for permanent facts: A language **dies**, on average, every two weeks.

Complex passive: Languages **were deliberately suppressed** as instruments of cultural erasure.

Emphatic contrast: Languages are **not** simply alternative labels — they **structure** thought in fundamentally different ways.

Result clause: The Kuuk Thaayorre use cardinal directions, **resulting in** extraordinary spatial awareness.

Concessive + purpose: Protecting diversity is **not about** nostalgia — **it is about** recognising irreplaceable value.

9

Speaking & Writing Tasks

Speaking Task

Discuss these questions with a partner or your teacher:

- Do you think it is possible — or desirable — to preserve all of the world's languages? Where would you draw the line?
- The text describes how some languages encode unique knowledge about nature and medicine. Can you think of words or concepts in your own language that do not translate well into English?
- Should governments be required to fund education in minority languages, even if this is expensive and complex?
- If you could save one endangered language, which one would you choose and why? What factors would influence your decision?

Useful Phrases for Discussion

What I found most compelling about the text was the argument that languages are not just communication tools but entire knowledge systems.

The examples of Hopi and Kuuk Thaayorre illustrate how profoundly language shapes the way we perceive reality.

While I understand the practical arguments for dominant languages, I believe the loss of linguistic diversity is a form of cultural impoverishment.

It could be argued that digital technology offers new opportunities to document and revitalise endangered languages.

Writing Task

Write a structured opinion essay (180–230 words) on the following topic:

"When a language dies, it is not just words that are lost — it is an entire way of understanding the world." To what extent do you agree, and what should be done to prevent language extinction?

Your essay should include an introduction with a thesis, two or three supporting paragraphs with evidence, and a conclusion with recommendations. Use vocabulary from the text.