
Arctic World Archive webinar 19 November 2024

Documenting, archiving, and supporting threatened languages

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Explore The Languages Of The World

Ethnologue contains information on 7,097 known living languages.

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Global distributions are skewed

- The actual size of populations who speak these 7,000 different languages is often hard to calculate but it varies widely, from over one billion to just a single individual
 - the top 6 largest languages in the world today are: Mandarin Chinese, Hindi/Urdu, English, Spanish, Arabic, Bengali (= 50% of pop.)
 - 96% of world's languages are spoken by just 4% of world's population
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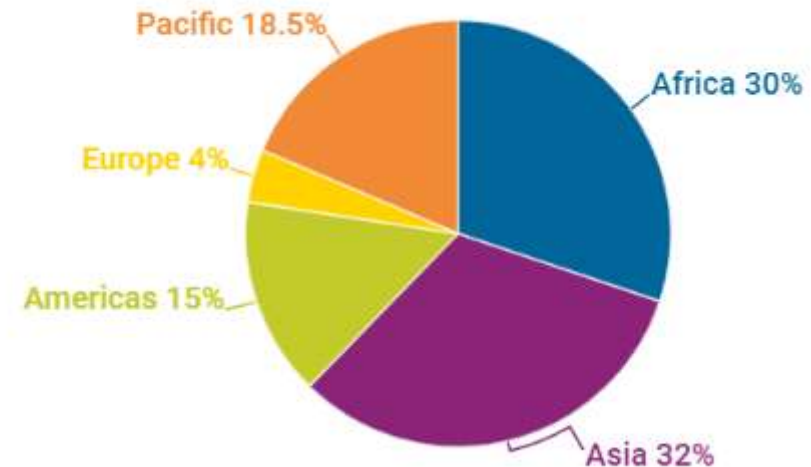
Distribution of languages (Ethnologue)

What continents have the most indigenous languages?

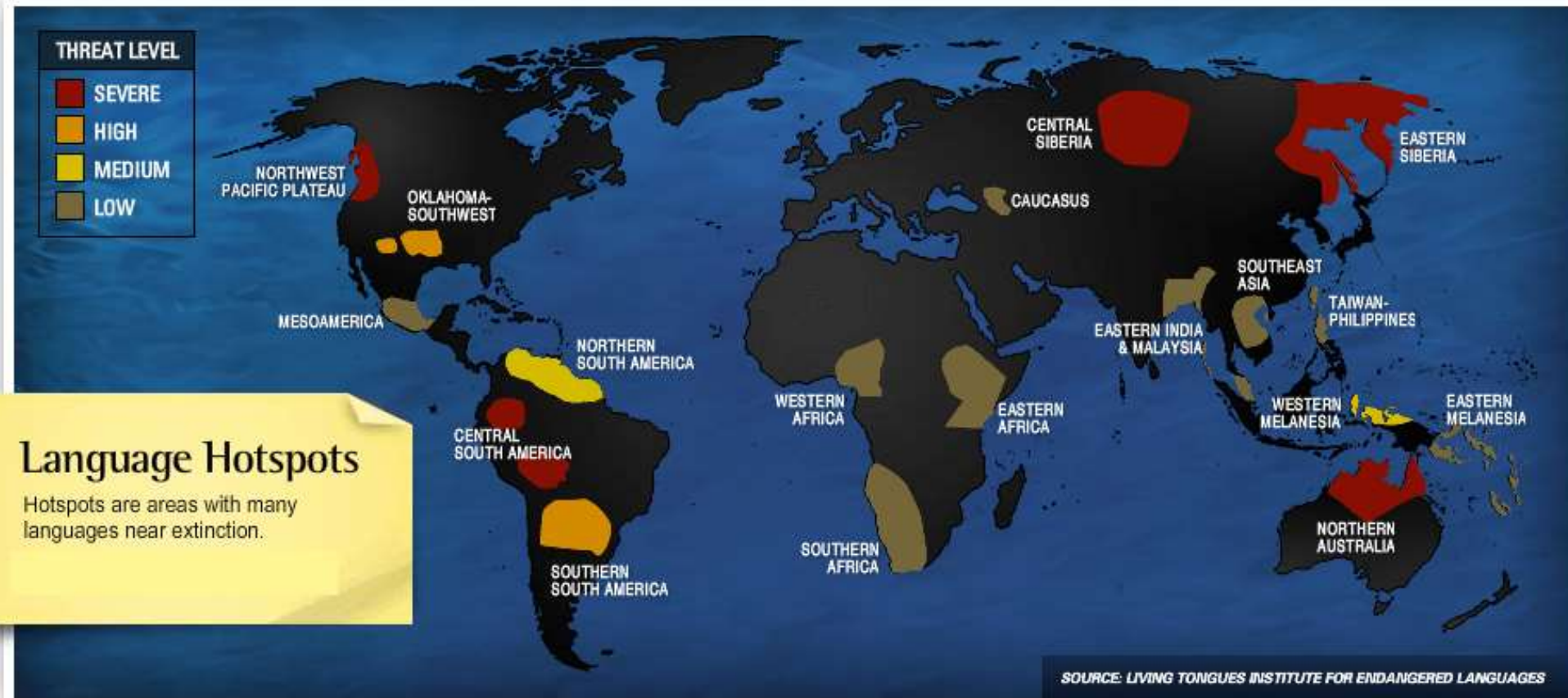
Asia has the most indigenous languages, closely followed by Africa. 

Combined, they account for nearly 2/3 of the world's languages. Myriad factors – terrain, cultural history, the spread of ancient civilizations – play into how many languages have originated within a certain area.

Percentage of the world's languages, by region



Language hot spots



Alliance for Linguistic Diversity



Possible responses

- Actively **encourage language shift** by speaking the dominant language and **not speaking** the ancestral language – adopt the hegemonic ideology
 - Be **apathetic** and don't care – “I don't use the language with my children but I hear it spoken in the village so someone else must be teaching it to their children”
 - **Reject personal responsibility** and leave it up to other people, schools or organisations to “look after the language”
 - **Take responsibility** to do something positive in your own family (develop a language policy)
 - Take an **active role** in promoting the language and culture, locally and in wider situations (“language activist”)
 - Organise and **create structures** to support the language and culture
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Why do anything?

- connecting with ancestors, the past, and cultural heritage, helping with identity;
 - healing from personal or historical trauma;
 - building and strengthening community;
 - developing knowledge and culture, especially ecological knowledge and traditions;
 - improving well-being, physical and mental health;
 - cognitive benefits of mother-tongue education and multilingualism;
 - serving as a solid basis for adding other languages and intercultural communication skills
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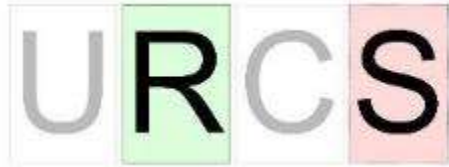
What else can we do?

- Bring the language **out of the home** to become part of the wider community language landscape – put up signage in multiple languages to make them visible in order to valorise local languages
- **Create contexts** where the local languages and cultures can be used and given positive value, e.g. cultural festivals, performances, interaction spaces (for games, chat, information exchange, social media)
- Be careful not to focus on the past and **hyper-traditionalise** the language and culture (“the good old days”) – this will turn younger people off and make it seem the language is not “modern”

What else can we do?

- Create archives of materials and resources (examples of language in use) for current and future users and learners
 - Archives require rich structured **metadata** to understand, manage, and preserve the materials
 - Language is a human, social and cultural phenomenon so archives need to pay attention to **ethics** and to **relationships** with speakers and communities
 - Ownership, access and use of archived materials need to be **discussed, negotiated, and documented**. They need to be **flexible** and able to change over time through dialogue and understanding
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Archive access management



- Universal – resource available to all, e.g. online
 - Register – resource available to registered users
 - Closed – resource not generally available (embargoed, “black box”)
 - Strict – resource available to users who have been given *individual* access rights for that resource
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Thank you!
