# Module 11: Language Death and Revitalization

## Before you read

Can you imagine what it would be like to be the last speaker of your native language? When Chief Marie Smith Jones, the last speaker of the Eyak language, was asked this question, she answered, “How would you feel if your baby died? If someone asked you, ‘What was it like to see it lying in the cradle?’” Without a doubt, the loss of a language signals a profound change in the descendants of the people who spoke it. If language and thought are interconnected, the unique worldview encoded in the language, the knowledge about the world it contained, the logics and ways of processing information such as counting, all of these things and much more is gone forever. And yet the fact remains that languages die all the time, and many times are survived by the people who once spoke it. Are there no more Eyak people if the Eyak language isn’t spoken anymore? Chief Smith Jones’s children and grandchildren would beg to disagree. And as we shall see later on in the module, the Wampanoag nation is trying to bring their language back after 150 years of extinction.

In this module we will cover the ways in which we classify languages as safe or endangered and cover some information language revitalization and revivals. Most importantly, though, what this module does is provide an answer to the question: “if languages die all the time, why should we care?”

Remember, items that are **bolded** may appear in quizzes and exams and require special attention!

## Focus points

In your reading, pay special attention to the following themes and concepts:

* What constitutes a **safe**, **endangered**, **moribund**, and **extinct** language?
* What lost when a language dies? What are some **reasons** given by linguists against language loss?
* What are the primary **causes** of language death?
* What is the difference between **language revitalization** and **language revival**?

## Classification of Languages

You may remember that the difference between a dialect and a language is hard to pinpoint. The closeness that exists between certain languages and language families can make it hard to put a hard figure on the number of languages in the world and, even more importantly, the number of languages that are endangered or dying. You might be surprised to know this, but there are languages that linguists and linguistic anthropologists haven’t even studied yet! In certain **hotspots of linguistic diversity**, there are many distinct, mutually unintelligible languages. For example, in **Papua New Guinea**, a country a quarter of the size of Saudi Arabia (where there are estimated to be **9 languages**), an estimated **860 languages** are spoken. In the **65 islands of Vanuatu** in the South Pacific, which together are roughly the size of Connecticut, an estimated **109 languages** are spoken.

That said, around the world:

* **94%** of the world’s population speaks nearly **6%** of the world’s languages. Which means, conversely, that
* **6%** of the world’s population speaks **94%** of the world’s languages.
* **50%** of the world’s population speaks the top **10** most spoken languages (see Ahearn pg. 244), which comprise just over **.1%** of the world’s languages.

In trying to account for language loss and extinction, scholars have come up with a criteria for classifying languages:

* **Safe languages**: languages that have official government support/recognition or a large number of speakers. Generally, any language with over **100,000** speakers is considered **safe**.
* **Endangered languages**: languages that, although still being learned by children, will cease to be learned by children if current conditions persist.
* **Moribund languages**: languages that have ceased to be learned by children and will disappear when current living speakers die.
* **Dead or extinct languages**: languages that are no longer spoken by anyone, even if these languages were written or recorded.

Take some time to read through the figures published by **Michael Krauss** on page 245. Keep in mind, though, that the numbers are far from exact, and that the very act of enumerating presupposes a certain imposition of a definition of **“language”** and **“speaker”** on the part of the researcher.

## The Implications of Language Death

Languages, like species, disappear all the time. And when they don’t die, they may change beyond recognition –for example, a speaker of contemporary English would not be able to understand English in 15th century England. So why should we be worried that languages are dying and disappearing? The film **The Linguists** should have given you a sense of the amazing diversity of depth and knowledge **encoded into language itself**. Linguist **David K Harrison** enumerates three areas of irreparable loss that accompany the death of languages:

1. The erosion of the human knowledge base, especially ecological knowledge.
2. The loss of cultural heritage.
3. The failure to acquire a full understanding of human cognitive capacities (remember **module 4**?)

In your reading, you should focus especially on **the third area of loss**. On page **249** of our textbook, Ahearn goes into detail explaining exactly what Harrison means when he says language loss **may lead to a loss of our ability to understand the abilities and limits of cognition**. In particular, read over the description of **Amazonian** and **Australian Aborigine grammar**.

Another linguist, **David Crystal**, wrote **5** answers in response to the question, “why should we care if a language dies?” Taking a broader stance than Harrison, he states:

1. Because we need diversity.
2. Because language expresses identity.
3. Because languages are repositories of history.
4. Because languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge.
5. Because languages are interesting in themselves.

The most important thing to keep in mind when it comes to language endangerment and loss is that, although language death **is** part of the natural evolution of all languages (e.g., Latin gave way to Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Italian), these processes do not occur without a context. Particularly in recent history, the colonization and domination of most of the globe by European and American empires and military interests means that the disappearances of languages are wrapped up in processes of **colonialism, postcolonialism**, and **power hierarchies**.

## Reasons for Language Death

Language death can be **violent**, but most of the time it is gradual. Many times, language loss is the direct result of institutional and state strategies –see, for example, the use of **Native American Boarding Schools** in the United States, where Native American children were prohibited from using their languages, or the **public shaming** of Welsh children in 19th century Wales. In my own ethnographic experience, I have found that although **Yucatec Mayan** is considered a **safe** language due to its large number of speakers, many **Maya parents have chosen not to teach their children Mayan** and speak to them only in Spanish, believing that speaking Spanish will give their children a better chance of financial success as adults. On the lighter side, check out this [story](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/13/mexico-language-ayapaneco-dying-out) about the last two speakers of the Ayapaneco language, who won’t speak to each other despite being the last to know their language

## Language Revitalization and Revival

### Revitalization

Language revitalization movements are flourishing all over the world today in places like [Ireland](http://anghaeltacht.net/ctg/altveritas.htm), [Guatemala](http://www.wuqukawoq.org/home/projects/language-revitalization/), and [Hawaii](http://www.islandscene.com/Article.aspx?id=4038). The most famous case-study is that of **Hebrew** in **Israel**, which successfully turned **Hebrew**, which was used only in religious contexts, into a **safe language** spoken by millions of people (see Ahearn pgs.**255-256**).

### Revival

“Language Revival” is much, much more difficult to accomplish than revitalization, because every single speaker of the language in question is gone. Language revival efforts usually will take place among groups of people who had no choice in the death of their language: in other words, survivors of genocides and ethnocide. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the most famous language revival efforts in the world is taking place among the Wampanoag Indians in southeastern Massachusetts. The [video](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/social_issues/july-dec11/efp_11-10.html) below is a short report about the documentary film, “We Still Live Here,” about the Wampanoag nation’s attempt to bring their dead language back:

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What do you think about Jessie Little Doe Baird’s efforts to bring her language back?

Because of time constraints, we can’t watch *We Still Live Here* in our f2f class. However, here is an interview of the film producers from NPR’s show *Tell Me More*. Feel free to google Jessie Little Doe Baird and “We Still Live Here” for more information on her story.