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The Politically Incorrect Guide to Language Death

Daniel W. Hieber

Disclaimer:

There's actually nothing offensive or politically incorrect about this presentation.

How boring.

Overview

1. The standard story
2. Question the received wisdom
3. Reach the same conclusions

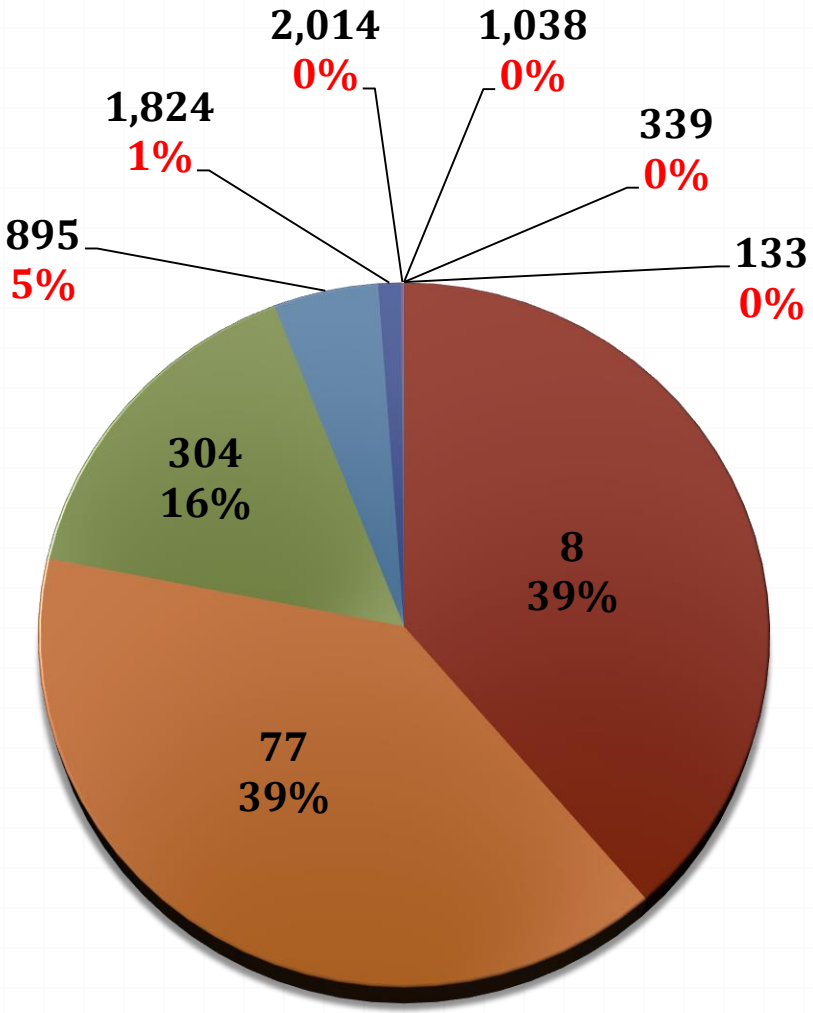
Why bother with this exercise?

- Conclusion: Language shift is complicated. Overly simplistic representations don't give us the insights we need to address the issue.

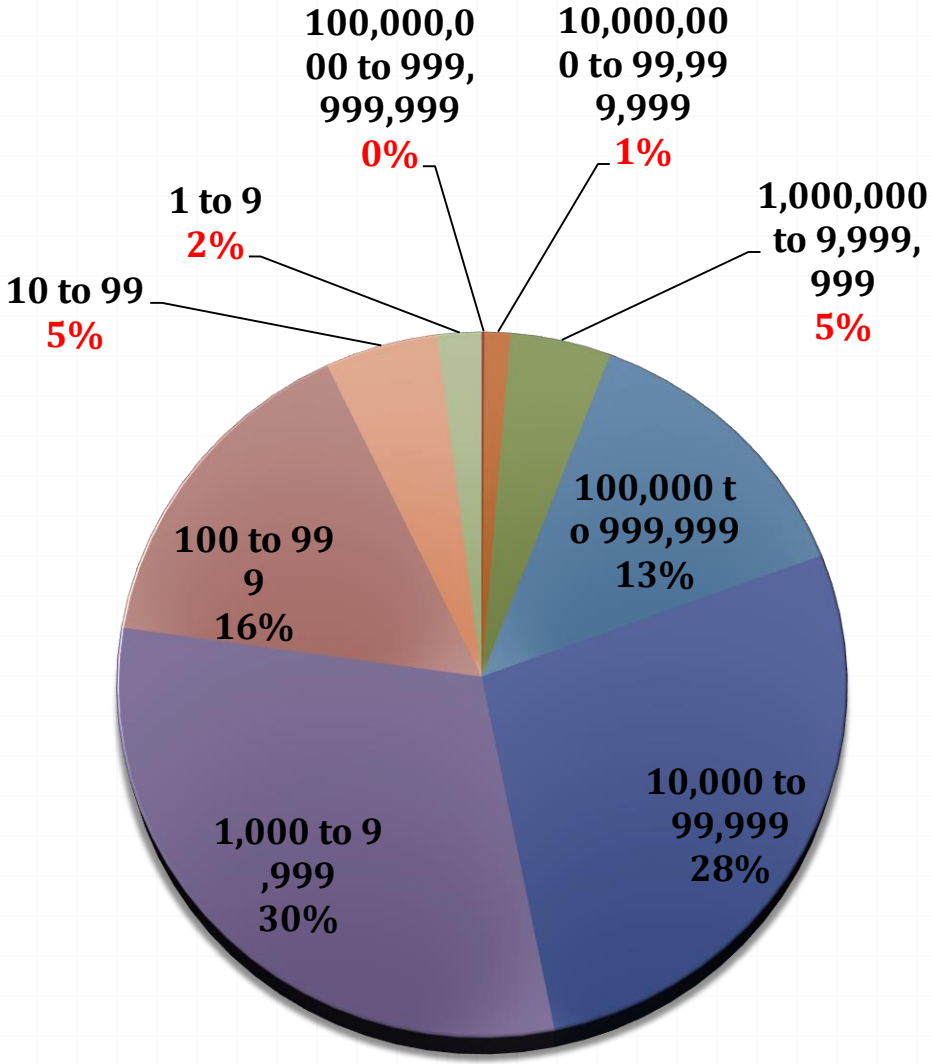
The Received Story

- Originally 10,000 languages[4]
- 6,909 living languages left[10]
- 50% - 90% of those will go extinct by 2100[14, 7]
- (Some) causes:
  - Globalization
  - Technology
  - Overt political repression
  - Cultural dominance

- Responses:
  - Document them before they die out
  - Revitalization and reclamation programs
  - Government support for endangered languages



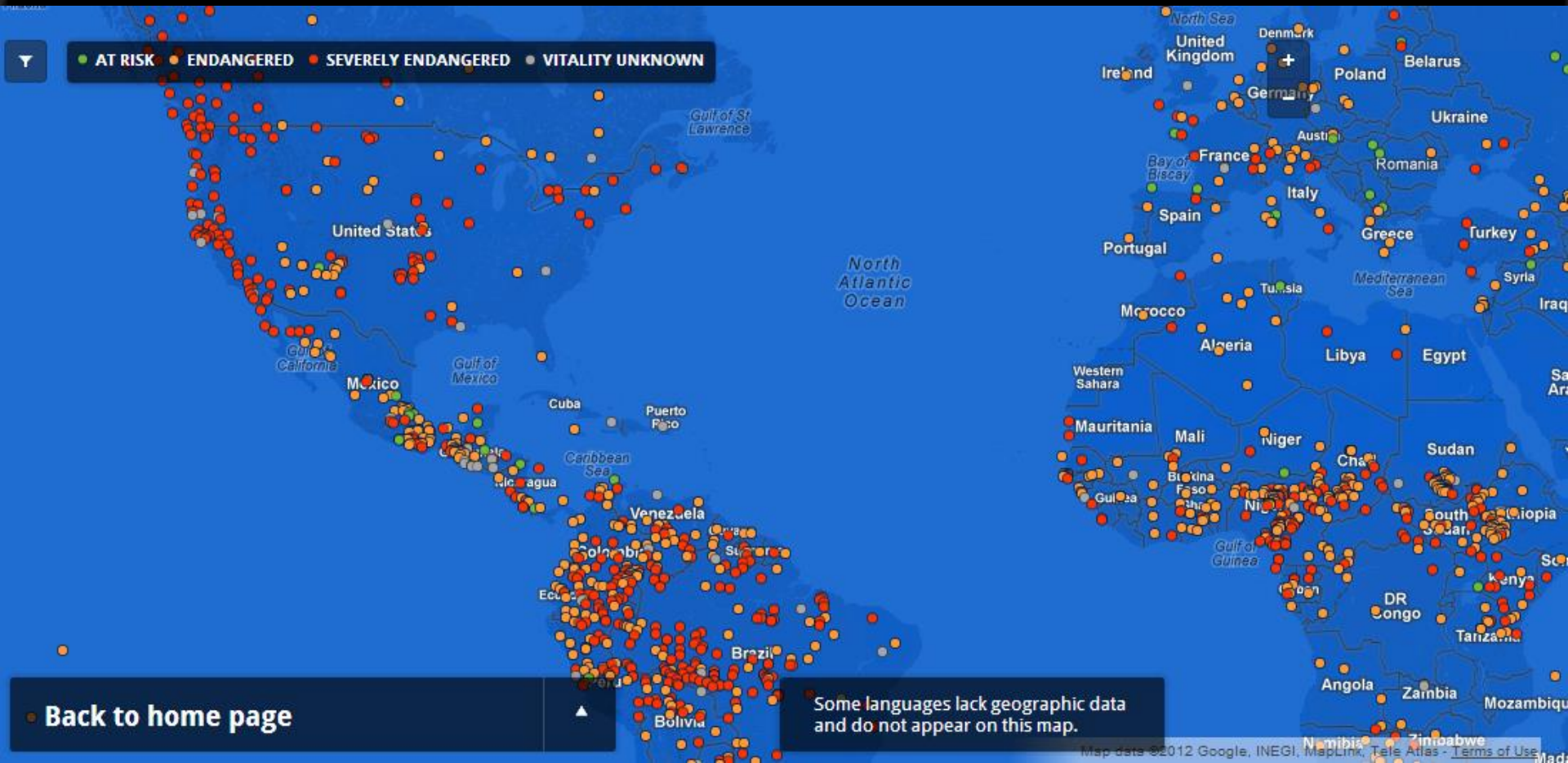
Languages as % of World Population[10]



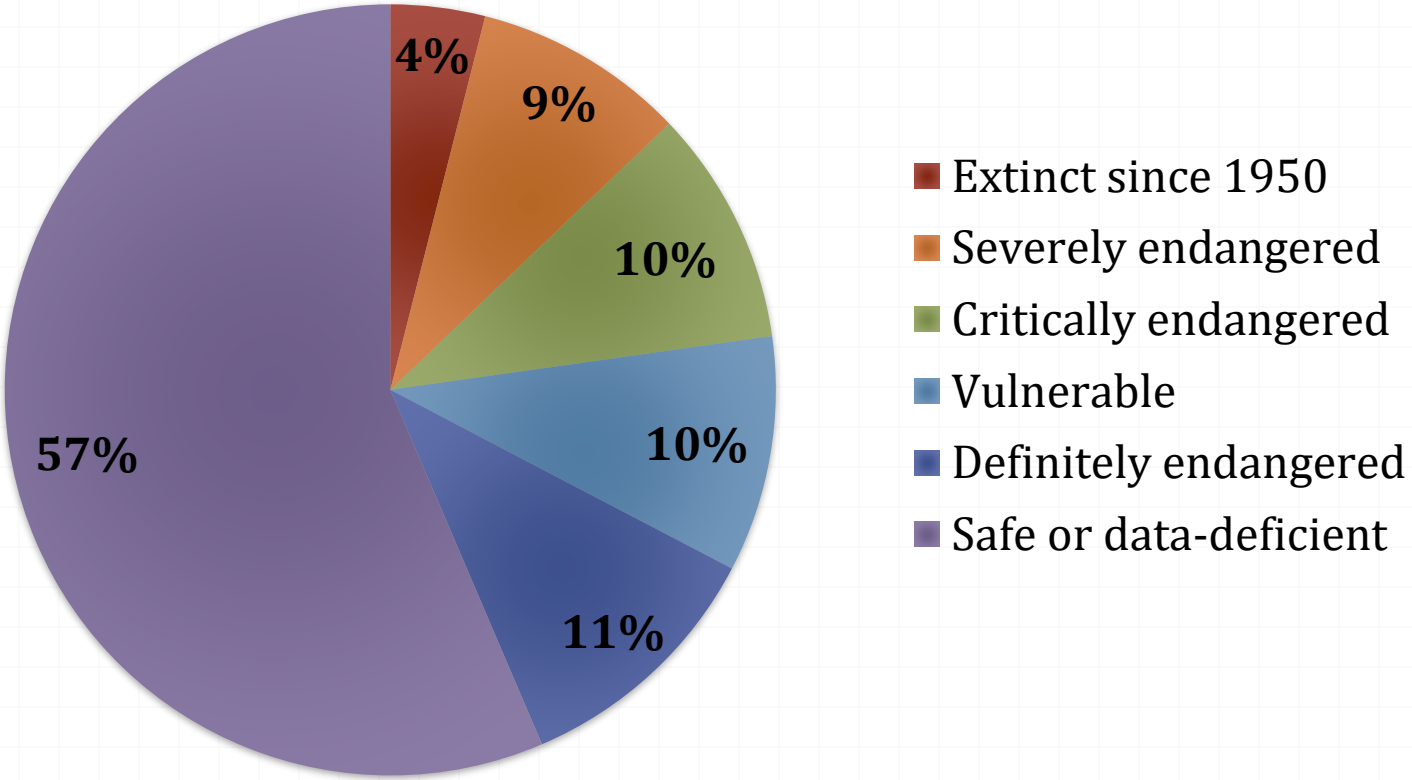
Languages by Speaker Population[10]

Endangered Languages[3]

3,167 currently endangered



Language Vitality[9]



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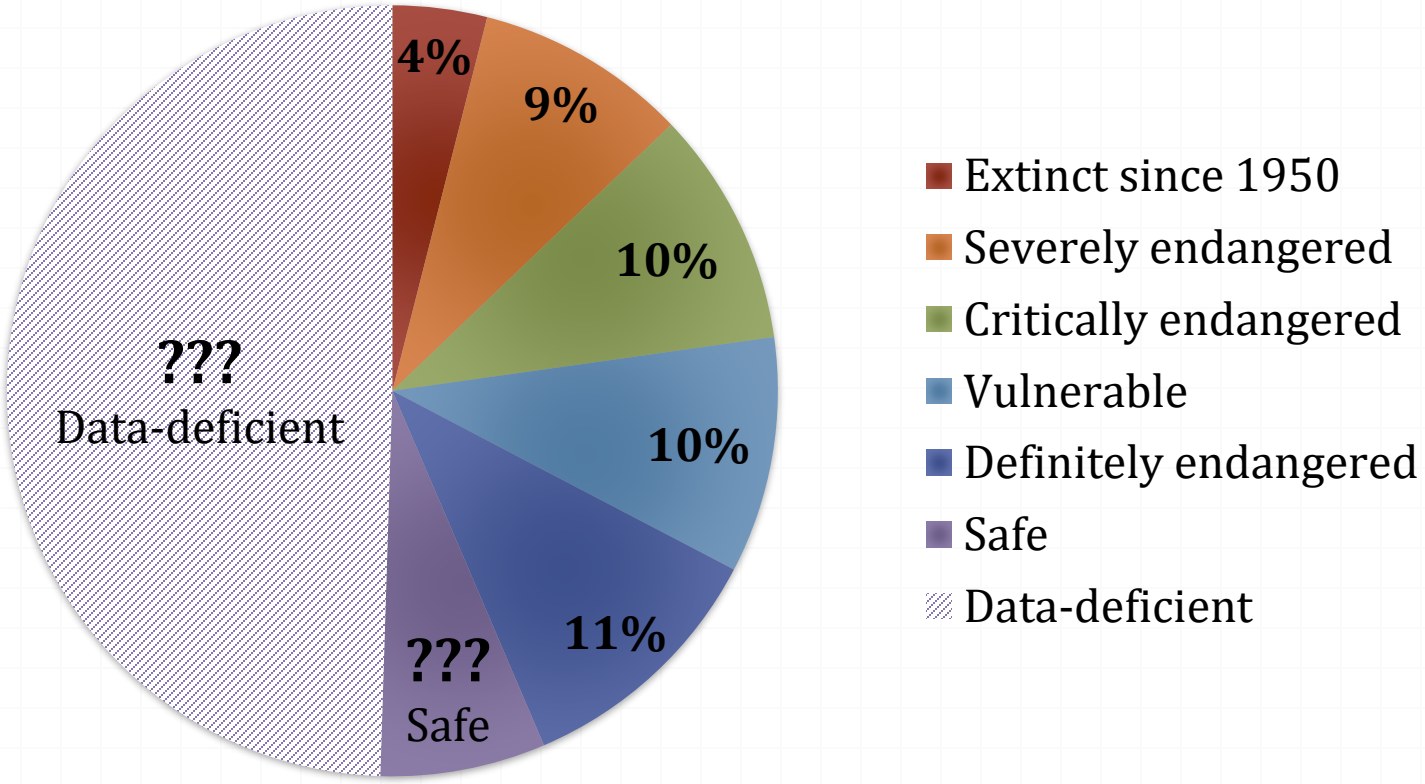


Why worry about language death?

- Value to linguistic science
- Irreplacable cultural heritage
- Loss of indigenous knowledge about the world
- Loss of indigenous perspectives on the world
- Loss of cultural identity
- Concommitant decline in biodiversity
- Language as a human right
- Benefits of mother tongue education and bilingualism
- Language death is happening faster now than before

A Closer Look at Language Death

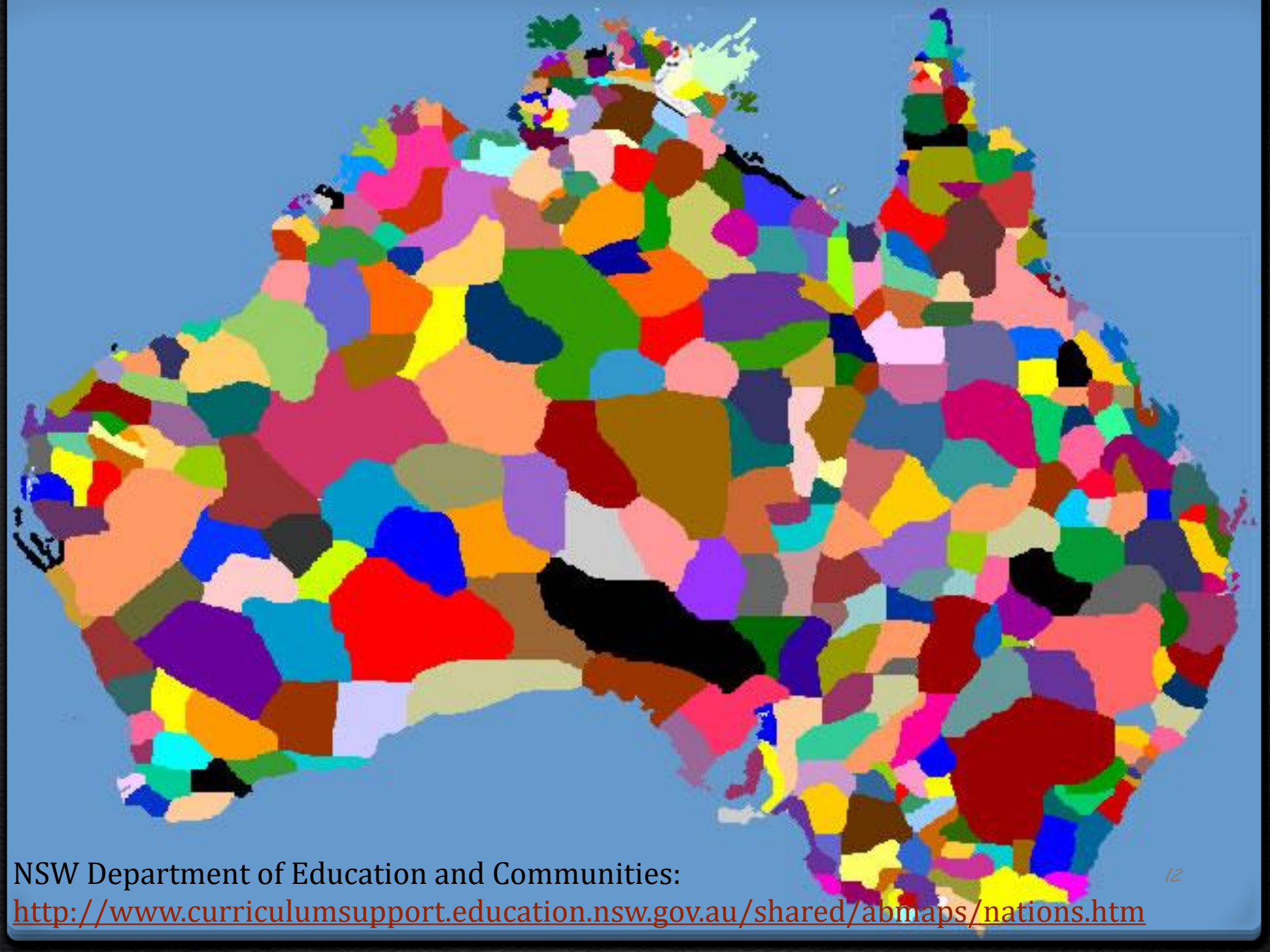
"There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics."

~ Mark Twain

The Original Languages

ante 8,000 BC

- Neolithic population estimate: 10 million[9]
- Hunter-gathering can only support small communities
  - Constant fracturing of groups into new branches
  - Each group speaks a slightly different language variety
- Received wisdom:
  - < ~500 – 1,000 speakers per language[7]
  - ~ 5,000 – 20,000 languages as of 10,000 y.a.



NSW Department of Education and Communities:
http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/shared/abmaps/nations.htm

- Question: Languages or dialect continuum?
- Question: Can we meaningfully compare language statistics from today to the Paleolithic?

The Agrarian Revolution

8,000 – 5,000 BC

- Sedentary lifestyle supports larger communities
- Languages grow and crowd each other out / absorb other speaker communities
- Received wisdom:
  - Languages have been continuously on the decline
- Decrease in # of languages offset by population explosion[7]
- Earliest instance of urbanization
- Renfew-Bellwood Effect – decrease in deep-level diversity, i.e. the number of language *families*[7]

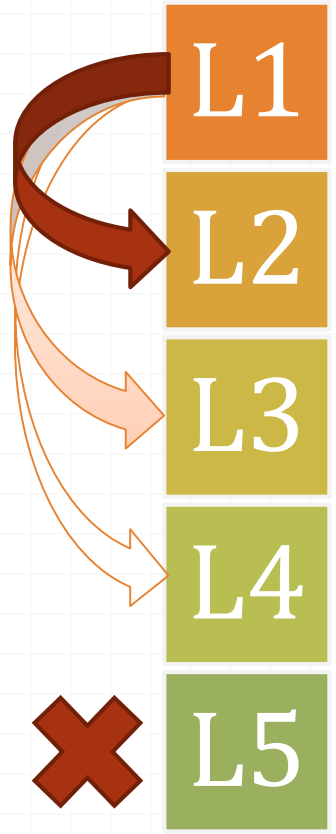
- Question: Is language death a modern phenomenon?

- Question: Are the causes of language death today compared to in early history different in kind or simply degree? Is language death today a fundamentally different phenomenon?

Counting Languages

- What's a language?
  - Mutual intelligibility

Dialect chain



Counting Languages

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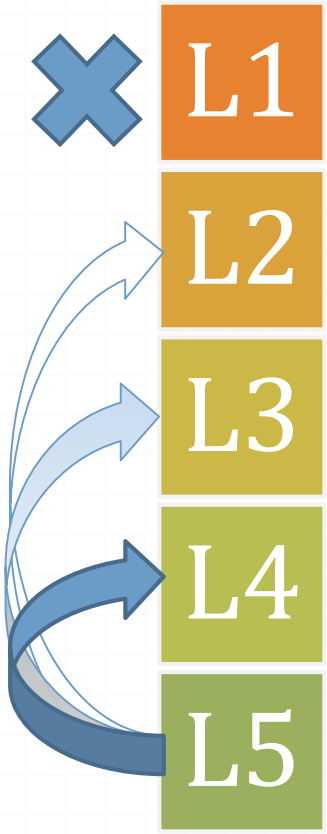
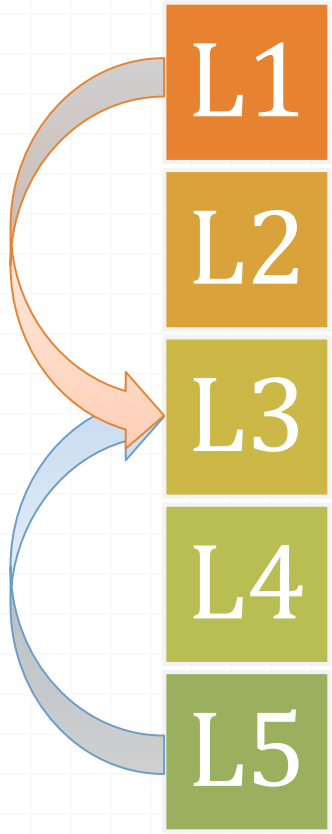


Counting Languages

- What's a language?
  - Mutual intelligibility
  - Politics
    - Chinese
    - Serbo-Croation
  - Language attitudes
    - Scandanavian languages

L3 = L1 or L2?



Counting Languages

- What's a speaker?
  - Cultural knowledge = linguistic knowledge
    - Do younger speakers count?
    - Knowledge of quotes, proverbs
  - Do outsiders count?
    - Linguists?
    - Non-ethnic community members?
- Are the numbers accurate?[5]
  - Self-reporting
  - Out-of-date data
  - Under-reporting
    - Australian Native Title[1]
  - Over-reporting
    - A few phrases = speaker

Ecological Metaphors

- Originally 10,000 languages
- 6,909 **living** languages left
- 50% - 90% of those will go **extinct** by 2100
- (Some) causes:
  - Globalization
  - Technology
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- Responses:
  - Document them before they **die out**
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Ecological Metaphors

- Language death / extinction
- Competition
- Language ecologies
- Preservation / revitalization

- Question: Are languages like organisms? How so? Why not?

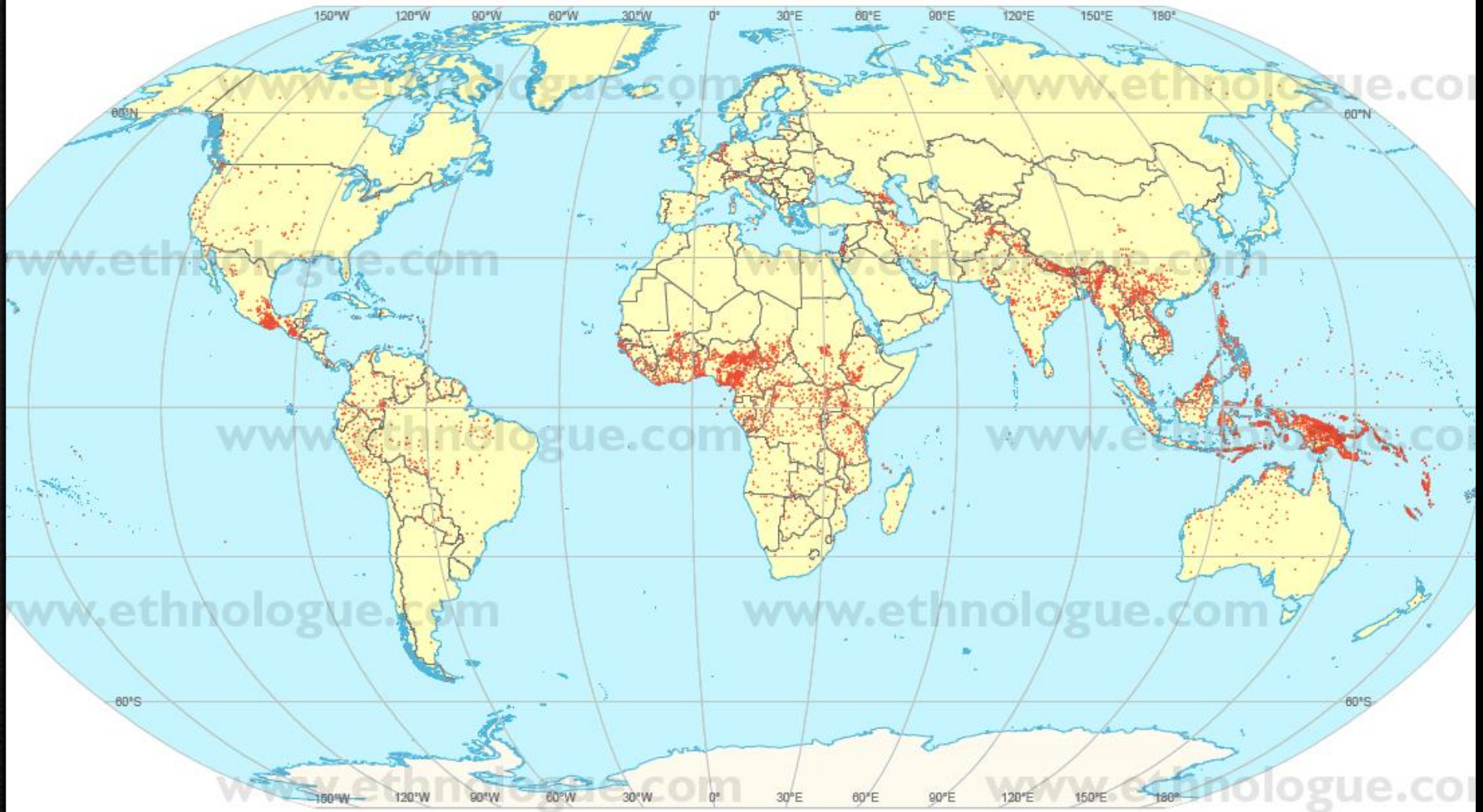
- Question: Which of these metaphors are useful? In what ways?

Language & Ecology

- Clear correlation between linguistic and biological diversity[16]
- Language ecology – relationship between languages and the people who speak them[5, 6]
  - Strong version – theory of language competition[13]
- Ecolinguistics – branch of language ecology[5]
  - Discounts notion of competition
  - Focus on connection between language and their 'habitat' or social, political, and economic contexts

LANGUAGES OF THE WORLD

Each dot represents the geographic center of a language.



www.ethnologue.com

- Question: Are the causes of language death and biological extinction the same?
- Question: Are the metaphors of language competition and ecologies useful? Or do they obscure the issues?
- Question: Do languages compete/die/have habitats, or do speakers, or both?
- Question: What terminology could we use that might more accurately represent these phenomena?
- Question: Do you think any of the terminology we've discussed is offensive or denigrating?

- Question: Languages naturally change and differentiate from each other over time. Is the rate of linguistic diversification equal to the rate of language shift / death?

- Question: Should we distinguish different types of diversity? What types?

- Question: Will dying languages be replaced by new ones? Will the rate of replacement equal the rate of extinction?

Language Birth

- Pidgins and creoles
- Revitalized languages
- Linguistic diversification
  - Latin > Spanish, Catalan, Corsican, French, Italian, Galician, Mozarabic, Occitan, Portugese, Romansh
- Regular processes of historical change

- Chinglish (China)
- Singlish (Singapore)
- Sheng (Nairobi)
- Portuñol (Brazil)

- Nubi (Arabic: Kenya)
- Afrikaans (S. Africa)
- Gullah (S.E. U.S. coast)
- Krio (Sierra Leone)
- Kreyol (Liberia)
- Haitian Creole (Haiti)
- Patwa (Dominica)
- Ladino (Judeo-Spanish)

Hunting for the Roots of the Language Shift

- Question: How true are the following statements?
  - 'Indigenous languages are dying because they can't express concepts needed for the modern world.'
  - 'Indigenous languages are dying because they're some of the most complex and hardest to learn.'

- Question: What is globalization?
  - Is globalization a cause or a result of language shift, or both?
  - How can globalization actually *support* linguistic diversity?

Overt and Covert Causes

- Natural catastrophes
- War and genocide
- Language policy
- Compulsory education
- Linguistic nationalism
- Economic conditions
- Political autonomy
- Language attitudes and associations
- Revitalization efforts?
- Technology?

- Question: How is language shift in autochthonous communities similar or different to language shift in immigrant communities?

- Question: Which is more important for understanding language shift – the language a person speaks, or the language they teach their children?

How should we respond?

- "Let them die in peace."[11]
- "It is paternalistic of linguists to assume that they know what is best for the community."[8]
- "Patwa is keeping back the children."[15]
- "it is most urgent to document languages before they disappear"[7]
- "our global village must be truly multicultural and multilingual, or it will not exist at all."[14]
- "Language death is a terrible loss, to all who come into contact with it"[5]

Subjectivity and Language

- Question: Is the value of language objective or subjective? (Note: subjective ≠ arbitrary)

- Question: Are languages mutually exclusive? Are they even in direct competition?

Conclusion

- Language endangerment is complicated.
  - (Sorry if you were hoping for a straightforward conclusion.)
- Overly simplistic representations don't give us the insights we need to actually address the issue.
- A great deal more research needs to be done in understanding the precise causes of language shift, so that communities can best address this phenomenon in the way that is most appropriate for them.

Contact Information

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Further Reading

- EndangeredLanguages.com
- *Dying Words* by Nicholas Evans
- *When Languages Die* by K. David Harrison
- 'Why do languages die?' by Daniel W. Hieber

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