

# **Ethnologue: Global Language Insight Report**

## **A World of Languages, 2015**

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**The ultimate information source for the world's living languages**

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## **1. Introduction the world of Language:**

Often, language is something that's taken for granted. After all, being able to communicate, via speaking, reading and writing, is an essential part of being human. Arguably, the need to understand and be understood is instinctual and, as such, language isn't something we seem to value on a conscious level. As we read this document, it's easy to forget our enviable position of being able to read, write and converse in English. Of course, we realize it isn't the only language on the planet. But, what do we really understand about language beyond that blanket statement? For instance, could we: (a) name the Top 30 languages based upon size; (b) state the number of living languages; or, (c) even name all of the languages in our own country? I'm guessing most people would answer 'no' to all 3 questions. In some regards, this is the motivation for producing this publication; it's a small step to reveal some of the hidden richness in language, and decode some of the complexities.

### **a. What is an 'Ethnologue' and where did it originate?**

Simply put, Ethnologue is the ultimate reference source of information about the world's living languages. Founded in 1951, the 1<sup>st</sup> edition featured 10 pages about 46 languages and/or language groups. Since then, through the dedication of hundreds of linguists and researchers, it has evolved into a comprehensive portfolio of printed and digital products. Building upon an academic and linguistic foundation, the 18<sup>th</sup> edition of Ethnologue features 7,102 languages; its derivative products and services attract more than a million consumers per annum. In 2015, the portfolio includes: Printed editions; PDF-based country reports; a digital Dataset; a Custom Products & Language Consulting service; and, the world's most comprehensive living language website – Ethnologue.com. It has become the definitive resource for those with an interest in cross-cultural communication, bilingualism, literacy rates, language planning and language policy, language development, language relationships, endangered languages, writing systems and for anyone else curious about languages.

### **b. Explanation of the content in this report:**

In a nutshell, the technical and academic side of language and linguistics are complex areas, full of complicated, multi-syllable words. In contrast, the purpose of this report is not to 'blind people with science', so to speak, but to introduce complex topics in a no-nonsense and jargon-free manner. Accordingly, we've distilled the numerical side into simple tables and graphs, and kept the academic linguistic jargon to a minimum. Our goal is to present language in a manner suitable for those interested in, and curious about, living languages across the globe.

In brief, much of the data revolves around two over-arching concepts: (a) the number of languages [the 'count']; and, (b) the number of speakers [the 'size']. In some sections, languages are also classified on 2 distinct 3-point classification scales: (1) relating to their size (Large, Medium and Small); and/or, (2) relating to their status (Established, Vulnerable and Endangered). The term 'dispersion' is used to describe the geographical footprint of a language; and, the term 'language families' is used to describe a group of related languages.

From a numerical viewpoint, almost all financial information is produced in simple tables comprising of totals, percentages and rankings. To aid reader comprehension pie-charts and

bar-graphs are used to illustrate numerical findings in visual form. In each sub-section, there is a brief narrative to explain the content, and provide some insight and context.

## 2. Understanding the world's living languages:

Language is something that all of us use, each and every day of our lives. In the digital era, we live in a commercial world that relies on 24/7 communication. As such, we are subjected to messages in written, visual and auditory form, relentlessly, from dawn until dusk. Arguably, language has become something most of us, perhaps even all of us, take for granted. Yet, beyond our own 'mother tongue' and our own linguistic capabilities, lies a complex and diverse world of 7,102 living languages. From those with 848 million 'mother tongue' speakers right down to those with a mere handful, all our living languages represent human culture. This section provides insight into the depth, breadth and richness hidden within the world's living languages.

### a. Geographical Analysis:

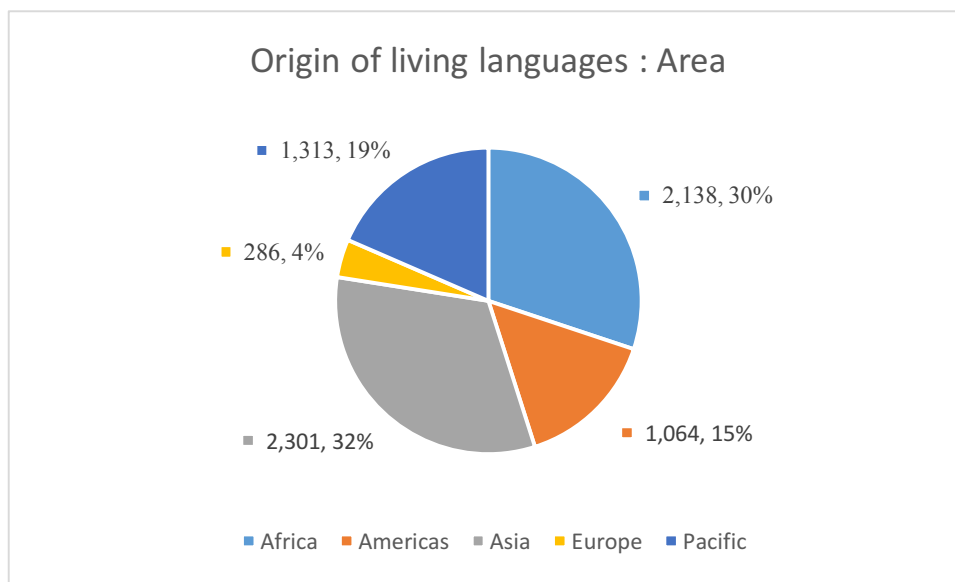
In the following table, the 'Count' column represents the number of living languages that originated in a given geographical area. A 'living language' is defined as one with at least one first language speaker, meaning 'extinct languages' and 'second languages' are excluded. Each language is counted only once, so the 'Total' reflects all the world's living languages. In contrast, the 'Total' column represents the number of people using those languages as their first language, regardless of their country of domicile. For example, the figure for European languages (1.638 billion) is almost double the population of Europe, due to the colonial expansion and increased dispersion of these languages.

Area	Living languages		Number of speakers	
	Count	Percent	Total	Percent
Africa	2,138	30.10%	815,252,580	13.0%
Americas	1,064	14.98%	51,527,759	0.8%
Asia	2,301	32.40%	3,779,634,812	60.1%
Europe	286	4.03%	1,637,993,977	26.0%
Pacific	1,313	18.49%	6,783,496	0.1%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7,102</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>6,291,192,624</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

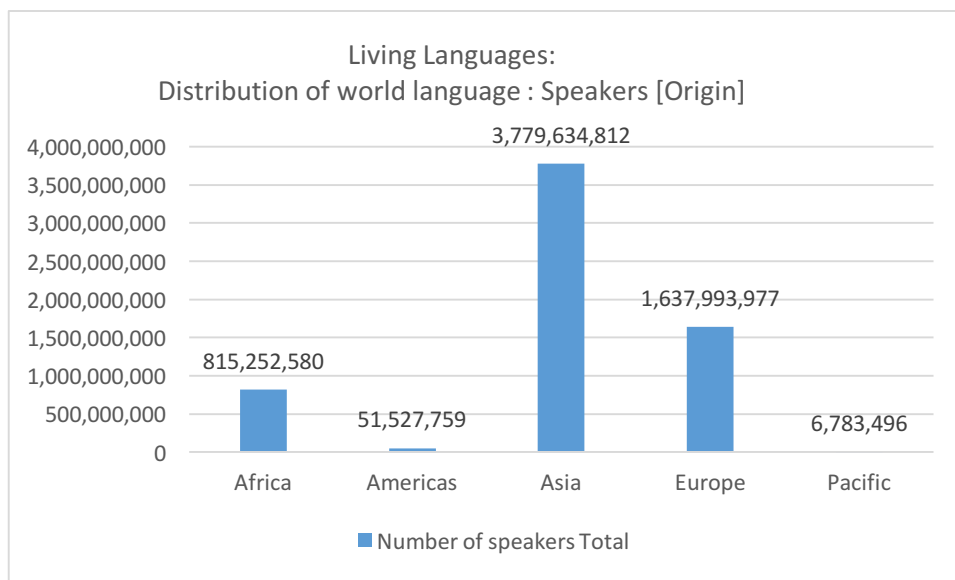
From a 'Count' perspective, 4,439 languages (62.5%) of the world's living languages originate from Asia (2,301 languages, 32.4%) and Africa (2,138 languages: 30.1%) combined. In contrast, from a 'Speakers' viewpoint, 5.418 billion (86.1%) individuals are first-language speakers of languages originating from Asia (3.780 billion: 60.1%) or Europe (1.638 billion: 26.0%). The magnitude of Chinese-speaking populations (e.g. Mandarin, Wu, and Yue et al) and European colonial expansion (e.g. English, German, French, and Italian et al) are some of the reasons for this pattern.

Of note, Pacific languages represent 0.1% in terms of speakers (6.8 million), despite there being 1,313 living languages (18.49%); reflecting the small number of speakers per language in this region (note: average = c.5,166 first-language speakers per language). Given this analysis is a count of first-language speakers, each individual is counted once; hence, 6.3 billion approximates the total world population (note: Ethnologue includes c.96% of language population data, and uses verified sources such as census figures – not

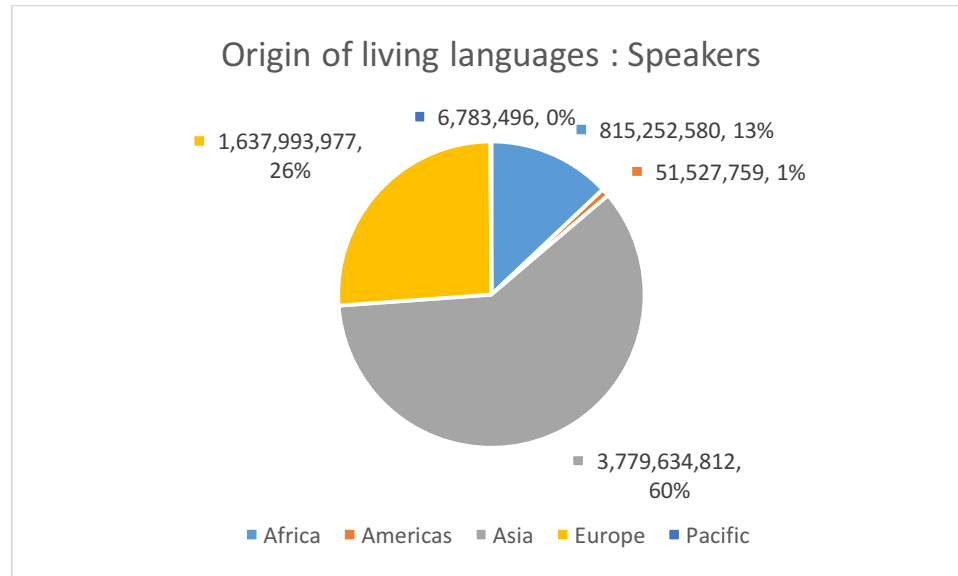
extrapolations). The following table takes the living languages 'Count' figures and presents the information as a pie-chart.



It is interesting to compare and contrast the living languages 'counts' (above) to the 'speakers' (beneath). For example: Pacific languages represent 0.1% in terms of speakers (6.8 million), despite there being 1,313 living languages (18.49%) originating in this area; and, Americas languages account for 0.8% of speakers (51.5 million), even though there are 1,064 living languages (14.98%) from this region.



The following pie-chart emphasizes this 'language divide' even further, illustrating the relative percentages based upon 'speakers', with the Americas (0.8%) and Pacific (0.1%) regions almost not even registering on either of the graphs! Indeed, it is thought-provoking to consider the Americas and Pacific regions combine to account for 2,377 of living languages (33.46%), despite representing a mere 0.9% of first-language speakers (58.3 million).



The geographical theme of this sub-section illustrates an important, recurring theme in language and linguistics; that being, that all languages are not equal. There are vast differences in terms of the numbers of first-language speakers, which will be explored in more detail in the next section.

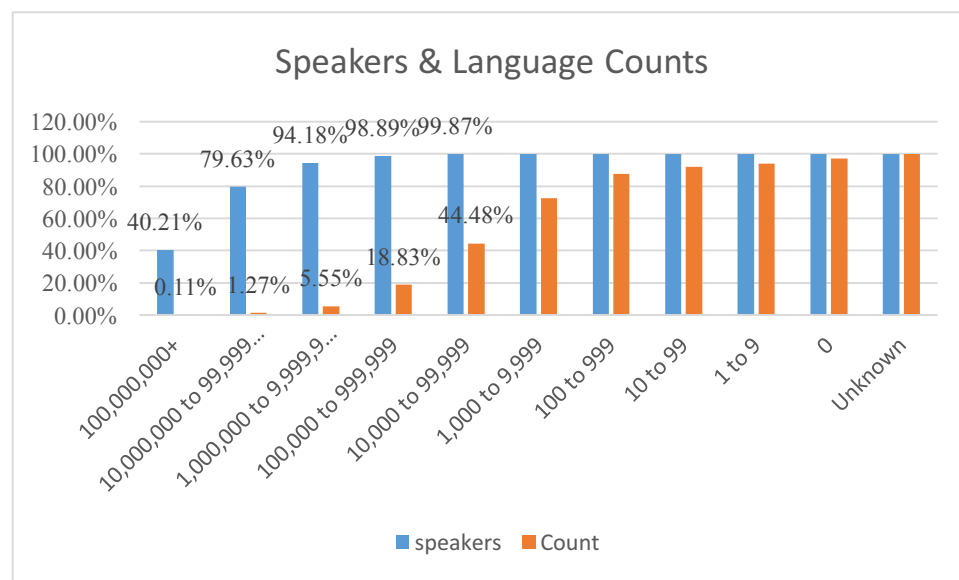
#### b. Demographic Analysis:

The following table classifies languages according to the ‘Population range’, based upon the population of first-language speakers (e.g. 8 languages feature a population in excess of 100 million). In similar fashion to the previous sub-section, the analysis features ‘Counts’ and ‘Speakers’, once again with simple totals and percentages. The columns with a ‘cum’ label are cumulative totals, which are also referred to as ‘running totals’ (i.e. the total including the current and previous elements). To aid reader comprehension, the table is color-coded: green for living language counts; and, yellow for number of speakers.

Population range	Living languages				Number of speakers			
	Count	Percent	Count [CUM]	% [CUM]	Total	Percent	Count [CUM]	% [CUM]
100,000,000+	8	0.11%	8	0.11%	2,529,403,578	40.21%	2,529,403,578	40.21%
10,000,000 to 99,999,999	82	1.15%	90	1.27%	2,480,078,977	39.42%	5,009,482,555	79.63%
1,000,000 to 9,999,999	304	4.28%	394	5.55%	915,659,448	14.55%	5,925,142,003	94.18%
100,000 to 999,999	943	13.28%	1337	18.83%	296,136,843	4.71%	6,221,278,846	98.89%
10,000 to 99,999	1,822	25.65%	3159	44.48%	61,802,734	0.98%	6,283,081,580	99.87%
1,000 to 9,999	1,982	27.91%	5,141	72.39%	7,633,408	0.12%	6,290,714,988	99.99%
100 to 999	1,065	15.00%	6,206	87.38%	464,299	0.01%	6,291,179,287	100.00%
10 to 99	338	4.76%	6,544	92.14%	12,777	0.00%	6,291,192,064	100.00%
1 to 9	140	1.97%	6,684	94.11%	560	0.00%	6,291,192,624	100.00%
0	206	2.90%	6,890	97.01%	0	0.00%	6,291,192,624	100.00%
Unknown	212	2.99%	7,102	100.00%	0	0.00%	6,291,192,624	100.00%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7,102</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>7,102</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>6,291,192,624</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>6,291,192,624</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Perhaps the most striking feature of language statistics is the existence of an

and the principle of factor sparsity, the Pareto Principle states that, for many events, roughly 80% of the ‘effects’ come from 20% of the ‘causes’. In the case of linguistics, though, the relationship between cause (‘languages’) and effect (‘speakers’) is even more pronounced. Indeed, if we look at the previous table we can see c.80% of the speakers (79.63% to be exact) come from just 1.27% of languages! In different words, 90 languages account for 5.0 billion speakers, and the remaining 7,012 languages represent 1.3 billion. The following graphic represents the cumulative patterns of counts versus speakers, for example: [a] 0.11% of languages (8) account for 40.21% of global first-language speakers (2.529 billion); and, [b] 44.48% of languages (3,159) account for 99.87% of global first-language speakers (6.283 billion).

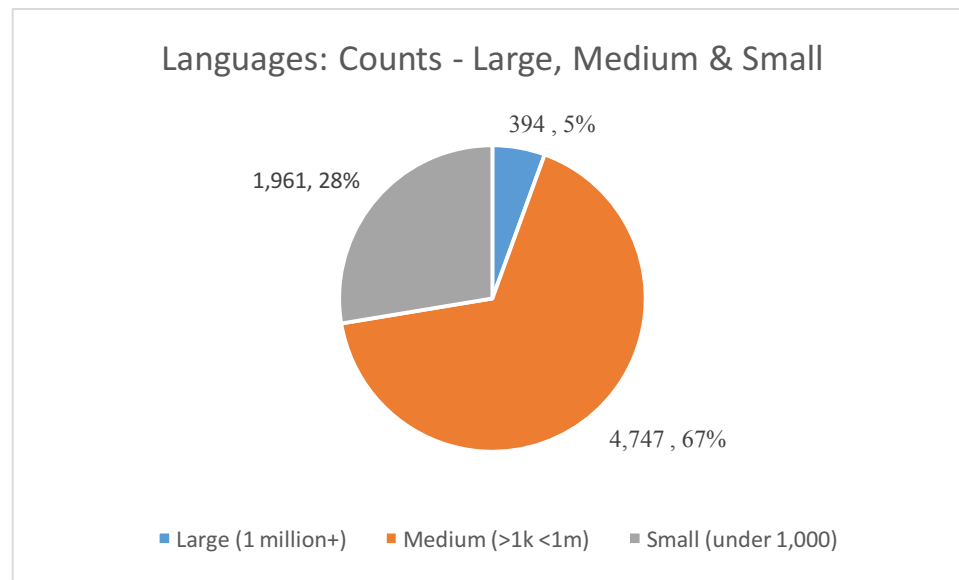


If we look at the 394 most spoken languages (5.55% of the world’s living languages), then we can see these account for 94.18% of speakers – 5.925 billion of the total of 6.291 billion categorized speakers. If we reverse this logic, then 6,708 of the world’s living languages (94.45%) account for a mere 366 million speakers (5.82%). Arguably, the most alarming fact about language diversity is that 1,961 of living languages (27.61%) now retain less than 1,000 first-language speakers, which equates to 0.01% in terms of speakers. Interestingly, there is no universally accepted definition of whether a language is large, medium or small, so the following table uses logical thresholds.

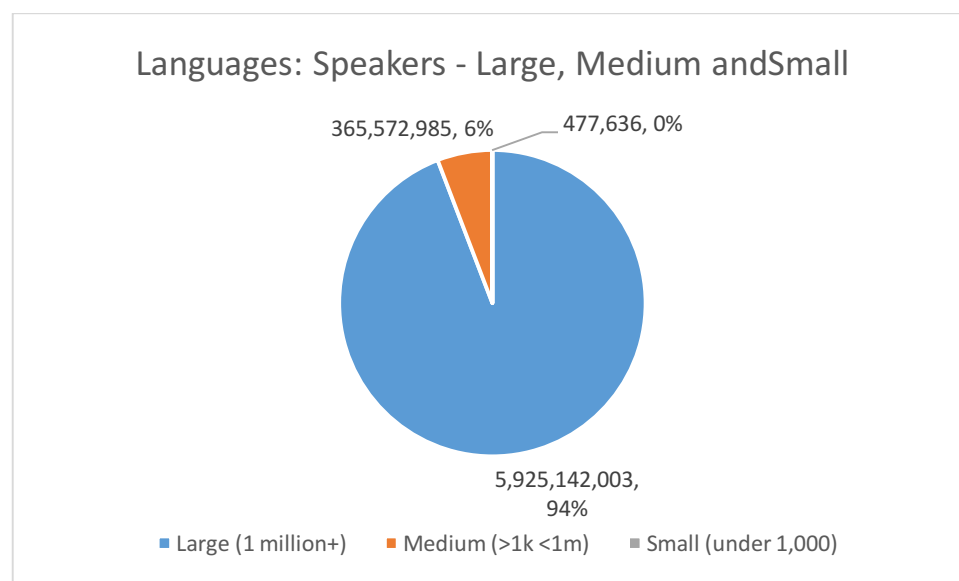
Number of Speakers	Count	%	Speakers	%
Large (more than 1million+)	394	5.55%	5,925,142,003	94.18%
Medium (>1,000 <1million)	4,747	66.84%	365,572,985	5.81%
Small (less than 1,000)	1,961	27.61%	477,636	0.01%
	<b>7,102</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>6,291,192,624</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Simply put, languages with more than 1 million speakers are classified as Large; those with less than 1,000 are defined as Small; and, those with more than 1,000 and less than 1 million are categorized as Medium. This means 5.6% of the world’s living

languages (394) represent 94.2% of speakers (5.925 billion), and the remaining 94.4% of languages (6,708) represent 5.8% of speakers (366.1 thousand). In contrast, 27.6% of living languages (1,961) have less than 1,000 first language speakers, and 94.2% of languages have less than 1 million speakers (6,708). The following diagram presents the language 'Counts' in size terms, using a pie-chart.



The next diagram presents the language 'Speakers' dimension as a pie-chart, noting the Small category of languages (0.01%) 'rounds to zero', so to speak. Given this segment of languages contains 1,961 languages, this insight illustrates the 'fragile' nature of almost 2,000 of the world's living languages.



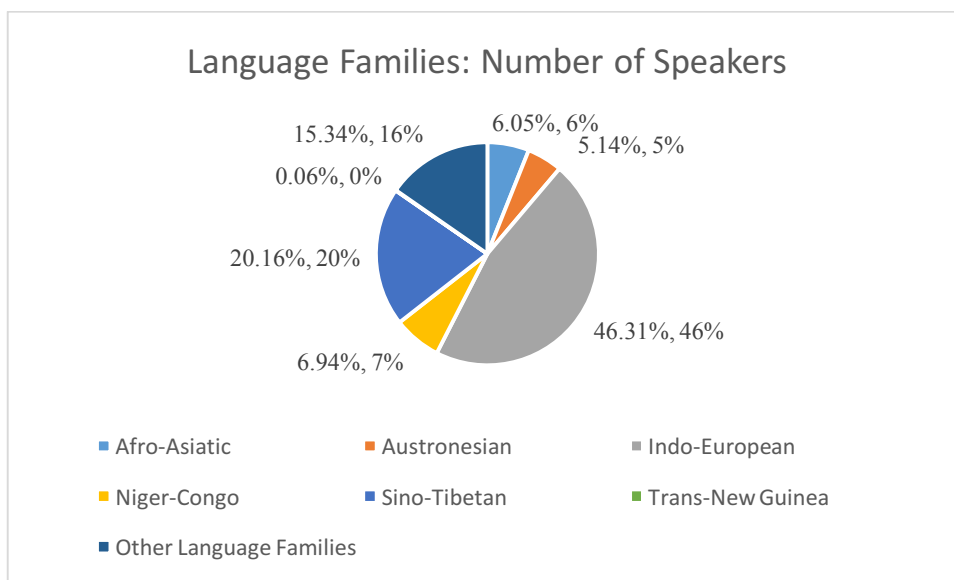
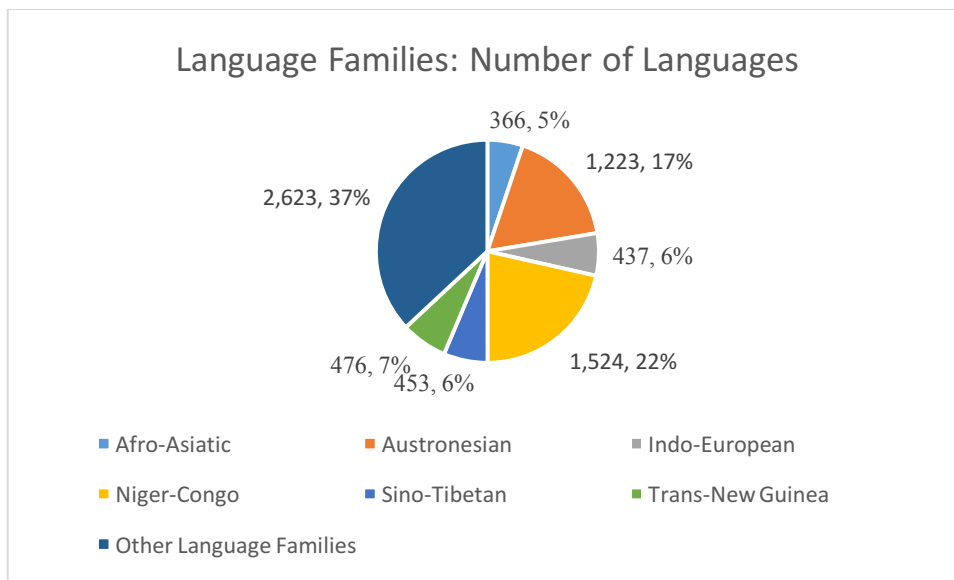
Once again, we can see significant disparities between the number of languages and the number of speakers. Of note, the 394 largest living languages (5.6% of languages) represent 5.592 billion speakers (94.2% of speakers), whereas the other 6,708 languages (94.4% of languages) constitute 336.1 thousand speakers. Out of this pool,



speakers. This being said, as with flora and fauna, languages – large, medium and small – can be related to one another and grouped together; this concept of language families will be addressed in the next section.

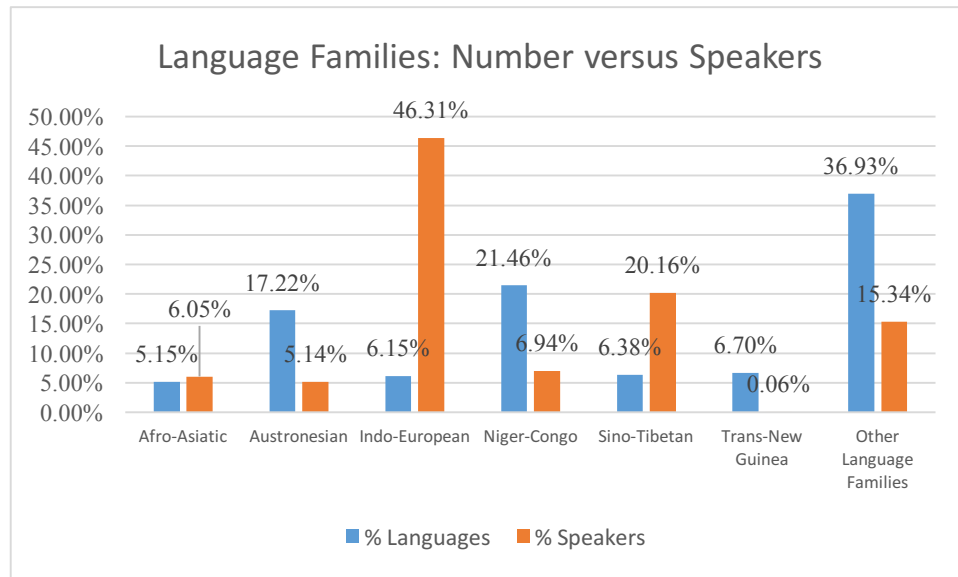
**c. Language Families:**

In simple terms, a 'language family' can be thought of as a group of languages related through descent from a common ancestor. There are 141 of these groups, noting 6 of these are considered the major language families in the world. Each of these larger groups contains more than 5% of the world's languages (based upon 'counts') and, combined, account for 63.07% of living languages and 84.66% of first-language speakers. The following two graphics illustrate the high-level characteristics of these 'major-league' language groups.



These high-level characteristics become more insightful, when we compare and contrast the number of languages in the families with the number of speakers. In this regard, we

can see there are significant differences between the sizes of the speaking population, and the number of languages in each group.



Once again, we can see some accelerated Pareto Principle relationships between cause (number of languages) and effect (number of speakers). For example, Indo-European is the smallest of the top 6 ‘major-league’ families in terms of number of languages (437 languages; 6.15% of languages) but the largest in terms of number of speakers (2.913 billion speakers); 46.31% of population). In contrast, Niger-Congo features the largest number of languages (1,534 languages; 21.46% of languages) but this group represents 436.8 million speakers (436.8 million speakers; 6.94% of population). The next table provides detailed insight into the top 6 ‘major-league’ language families.

Major Language Families	Number of Languages		Number of speakers	
	Total	%	Total	%
Afro-Asiatic	366	5.15%	380,821,999	6.05%
Austronesian	1,223	17.22%	323,456,908	5.14%
Indo-European	437	6.15%	2,913,575,380	46.31%
Niger-Congo	1,524	21.46%	436,814,956	6.94%
Sino-Tibetan	453	6.38%	1,268,181,584	20.16%
Trans-New Guinea	476	6.70%	3,540,024	0.06%
Other Language Families	2,623	36.93%	964,801,773	15.34%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>7,102</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>6,291,192,624</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

In the next section, we will continue our exploration of living languages. This time around, we will consider language diversity and, more specifically, focus on counties with more than 50 living languages.

#### d. Diversity of Language:

As we’ve seen so far, a relatively small number of languages are spoken by hundreds of

terms 1 in 4 humans speaks one of these 3 languages. In contrast, the majority of the world's living languages are spoken by only a few thousand, or even just a handful of people. Often, countries focus on the larger languages – in terms of government, education, healthcare and commerce – meaning the smaller languages are neglected, and relegated to informal and social situations.

Because of this unofficial 'caste-system for languages', where certain languages dominate a country in terms of speaking population, it's not uncommon for people to consider a monolingual way of life as 'the norm'. After all, being able to read, write and converse in English, arguably means we expect to be able to use English to communicate in countries such as America, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, right? Perhaps some of us realize Canada operates a bi-lingual basis, giving English and French equal status. Yet, despite this awareness of 'other languages', there is almost an unwritten and unspoken assumption that people living in France just speak French, or people living in Russia just speak Russian.

In generic terms, many of us probably assume the majority of people live monolingual or bilingual lifestyles. In factual terms, though, the world of language is far more complex. Indeed, given there are 45 countries featuring more than 50 living languages (indigenous + immigrant), this is something of an understatement. If we return to our English-speaking countries from above, there are: 422 living languages in America; 56 living languages in the United Kingdom; 245 living languages in Australia; and, 174 living languages in Canada.

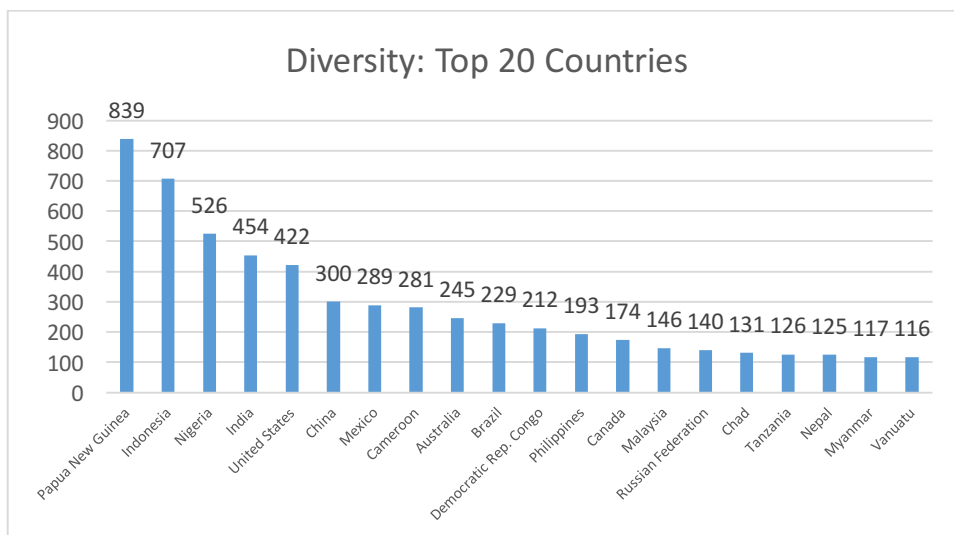
The following table provides further insight and is presented in ranking order, based upon the count of living languages. For completeness, this also provides the total number of speakers.

Country	Living languages			Speakers	Diversity	
	Count	Indigenous	Immigrant	Number of speakers	Index	Coverage
Papua New Guinea	839	839	0	4,122,278	0.988	98.00%
Indonesia	707	706	1	221,398,286	0.816	91.00%
Nigeria	526	520	6	104,853,605	0.892	90.00%
India	454	447	7	1,078,151,321	0.914	83.00%
United States	422	216	206	278,895,278	0.334	100.00%
China	300	297	3	1,214,365,238	0.512	97.00%
Mexico	289	283	6	109,118,551	0.109	100.00%
Cameroon	281	280	1	10,171,376	0.974	100.00%
Australia	245	212	33	17,573,909		89.00%

Brazil	229	216	13	192,700,368	0.058	91.00%
Democratic Republic of the Congo	212	210	2	39,872,030	0.947	60.00%
Philippines	193	182	11	72,208,122	0.843	96.00%
Canada	174	89	85	32,949,601	0.603	71.00%
Malaysia	146	138	8	24,355,505	0.761	95.00%
Russian Federation	140	105	35	158,381,420	0.251	100.00%
Chad	131	131	0	6,655,659	0.945	75.00%
Tanzania	126	125	1	43,282,690	0.857	96.00%
Nepal	125	120	5	26,593,200	0.755	100.00%
Myanmar	117	117	0	46,528,905	0.519	91.00%
Vanuatu	116	110	6	191,691	0.973	73.00%
Viet Nam	111	108	3	76,935,370	0.267	100.00%
Côte d'Ivoire	98	81	17	11,421,290	0.919	98.00%
Peru	94	93	1	29,669,086	0.341	100.00%
Laos	91	85	6	5,690,594	0.691	85.00%
Ethiopia	89	86	3	65,683,980	0.852	93.00%
Colombia	87	84	3	41,460,390	0.022	75.00%
Thailand	86	74	12	51,695,583	0.740	95.00%
Ghana	85	81	4	25,132,506	0.835	93.00%
Central African Republic	82	71	11	3,488,143	0.959	100.00%
Iran	80	76	4	89,585,020	0.710	100.00%
Pakistan	77	72	5	158,471,460	0.802	82.00%
Sudan	76	76	0	18,861,600	0.363	83.00%
Kenya	72	67	5	37,135,208	0.927	94.00%
Mali	71	66	5	12,376,590	0.888	100.00%

Solomon Islands	71	71	0	379,923	0.968	86.00%
Burkina Faso	70	70	0	10,755,830	0.762	97.00%
South Sudan	68	68	0	4,444,650	0.929	89.00%
Germany	66	27	39	89,137,250	0.378	33.00%
Congo	65	62	3	2,759,310	0.810	40.00%
France	62	23	39	67,045,405	0.198	100.00%
Benin	56	55	1	7,234,700	0.929	94.00%
United Kingdom	56	13	43	60,251,900	0.148	92.00%
Zambia	55	46	9	11,433,570	0.830	69.00%
Israel	51	35	16	8,702,175	0.667	98.00%
Venezuela	50	44	6	26,879,865	0.043	88.00%

For most of us, being bi-lingual or tri-lingual is an aspirational goal. Consider for a moment, the practical challenges involved in educating and governing in countries such as Papua New Guinea (839 languages) or Indonesia (707 languages). The ‘diversity of languages’ and of cultures, as in the case of biodiversity, is increasingly being given prominence. All languages have their individual identity and value, and all are equally effective as methods of communication for the people who use them. To illustrate this further, here is a diagram of the top 20 most ‘language-diverse’ countries, each with more than 100 languages.



A different facet of language diversity, is the geographical diversity – or ‘footprint’ – a language has, in terms of where it is spoken. Given this, let’s turn our attention to ‘language dispersion’.

#### e. Language Dispersion:

The geographical footprint of various languages, is another important dimension to understand. In the world of flora and fauna, certain ‘species’ flourish across international boundaries, whereas others are concentrated to a certain region.

In simplistic terms, the same can be said in linguistics where certain languages are more dispersed and others are more isolated. There are a number of complicated, contributing factors associated with this, such as geographic boundaries (e.g. islands), colonial expansion (i.e. rise and fall of empires), former ‘political or monarchist’ influences, language families, trade pacts et al. The purpose of this report is not to explain the rationale in terms of ‘how and why’ certain languages are (or are not) dispersed or isolated, per se.

Instead, this report provides insight into world’s Top 20 most dispersed languages. This includes languages which are indigenous or immigrant in 20+ countries. For completeness, the table also provides the number of first-language speakers and a languages overall rank (based upon size).

Rank Size	Language	Language Size	Language Dispersion			Rank Dispersion
		Speakers (millions)	Total Countries	Established	Immigrant	
3	English [eng]	335.00	129	101	28	1
2	Spanish [spa]	399.00	74	31	43	2
13	French [fra]	75.90	73	53	20	3
10	German, Standard [deu]	78.10	45	18	27	4
73	Greek [ell]	13.40	38	9	29	5
5	Portuguese [por]	203.00	37	12	25	6
7	Russian [rus]	166.00	37	16	21	7
20	Italian [ita]	63.80	36	11	25	8
16	Turkish [tur]	70.90	36	8	28	9
12	Korean [kor]	77.20	35	5	30	10
53	Kurdish, Northern [kmr]	20.20	31	9	22	11
127	Armenian [hye]	5.90	30	14	16	12
1	Chinese, Mandarin [cmn]	848.00	27	12	15	13
24	Persian, Iranian [pes]	47.40	27	6	21	14
32	Ukrainian [ukr]	34.90	27	9	18	15
8	Japanese [jpn]	128.00	26	2	24	16
22	Chinese, Yue [yue]	62.20	25	10	15	17
29	Polish [pol]	38.60	25	9	16	18
18	Vietnamese [vie]	67.80	25	3	22	19
4	Hindi [hin]	260.00	23	4	19	20

Total Speakers  
% of Total

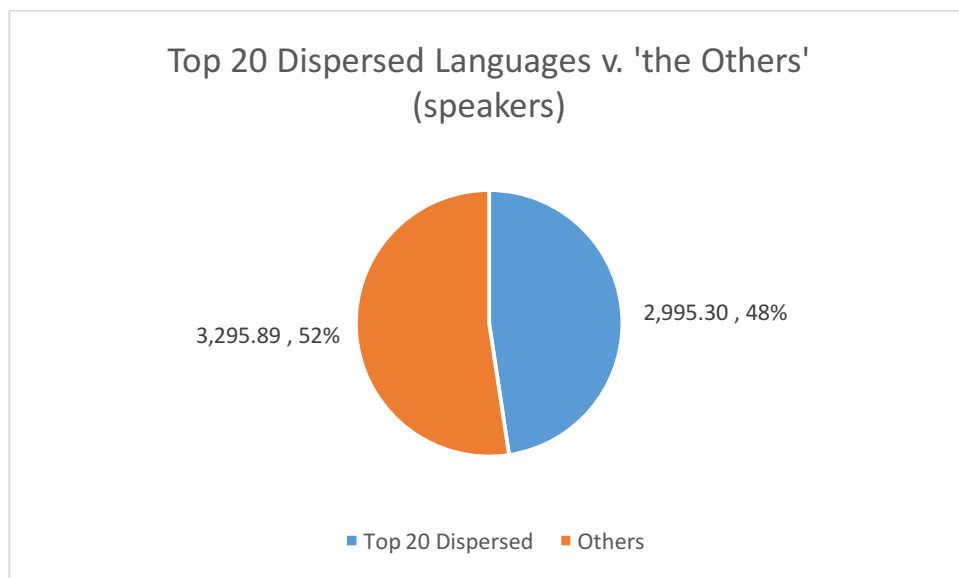
6,291.20
47.61%

Total  
Languages  
% of Total

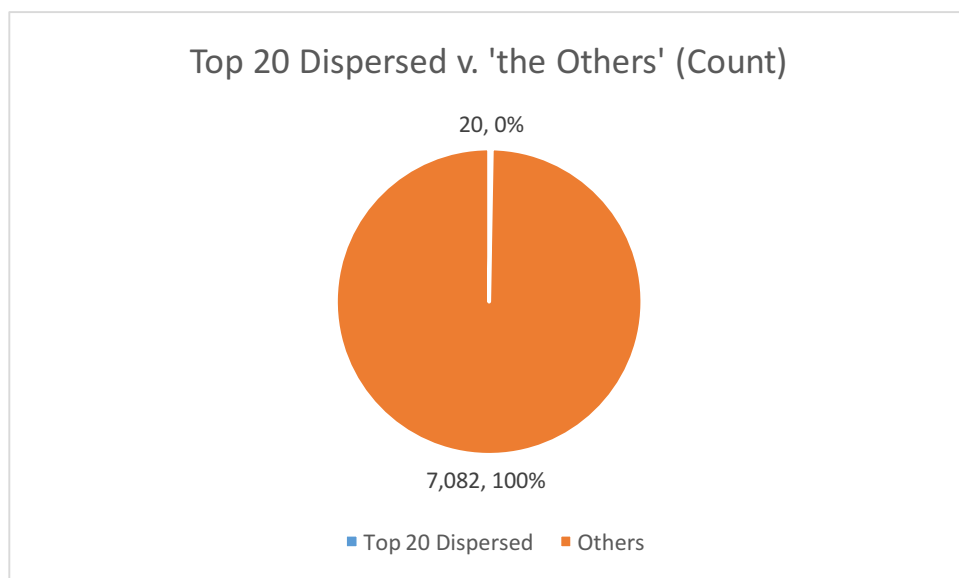
7,102
0.28%

In simple terms, the top 20 most dispersed languages (0.28% of languages) account for almost 3 billion speakers (2.995 billion speakers; 47.61% of population). Of note, the 7 of the top 10 largest languages (based upon speakers) are also within the top 20 most dispersed; this suggests a correlation between dispersion and population of speakers. There is also a probable correlation relating to the influence of 'fallen empires' and 'colonial expansion'.

The following graphic presents the top 20 most dispersed languages based upon 'speakers':

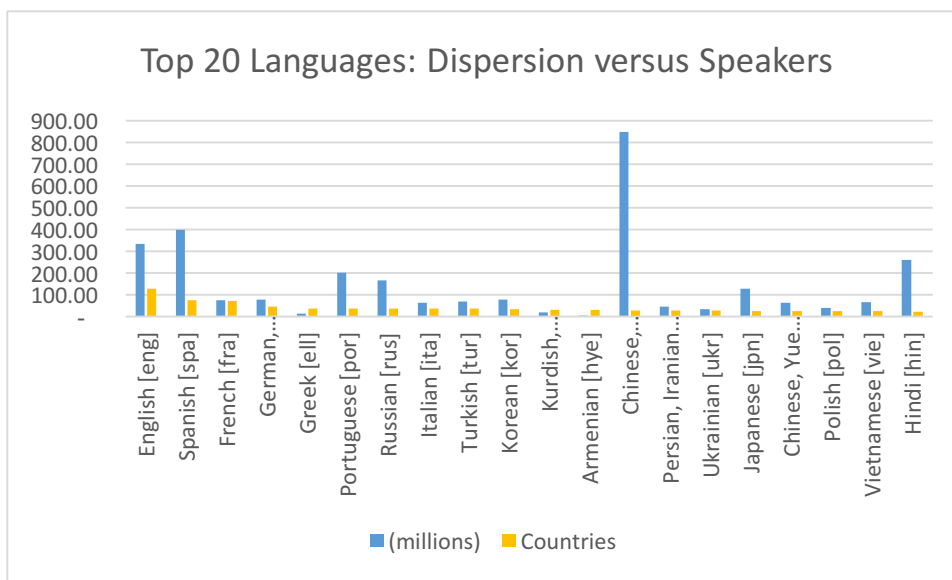


The following graphic presents the top 20 most dispersed languages based upon 'count'



Note: 20 languages = 0.28% and therefore 'rounds to zero' on this graph

The following graphic compares and contrasts the number of speakers (in terms of total speaking population) with the number of countries (in terms of the geographical dispersion).



Given the general observation that larger languages are often more dispersed ('stronger'), arguably this suggests smaller languages are more isolated ('weaker'). The notion of stronger and weaker languages is important in language, because – just like flora and fauna – languages can flourish, survive or become extinct. This leads us onto the topic of Language Endangerment.

#### f. Language Endangerment:

In most of the previous sections, we've seen that certain languages are larger than others in terms of the speaking population. In different words, a relatively small number of languages are spoken by hundreds of millions, whereas the majority of the world's living languages are spoken by only a few thousand, or even just a handful of people. The dramatic differences in 'people power' does not make them better or superior systems of communication, but it does – arguably – make larger languages stronger and more resilient.

In addition to this, we've seen certain languages are dispersed and spoken in dozens of countries, whereas others are isolated. In some countries, where there is a large degree of language diversity, we can – to some extent – consider these co-existing languages as being in indirect competition with one another. In simplistic terms, it is reasonable to assume smaller, isolated languages existing in 'competitive language environments' are at a distinct disadvantage to larger, dispersed languages with fewer 'competing languages'. Indeed, just as some flora and fauna are in a life or death struggle for survival, an increasing number of languages face the threat of extinction.

There are a number of 'language endangerment' classification systems, which, in simplistic terms, grade a language on its 'strength'. This being said, most of these scales are academic in nature and designed for language practitioners and linguists. In a nutshell, these scales differentiate between 'stronger' languages (survive and flourish) and 'weaker' languages (wither and perish). To aid reader comprehension, this report uses a



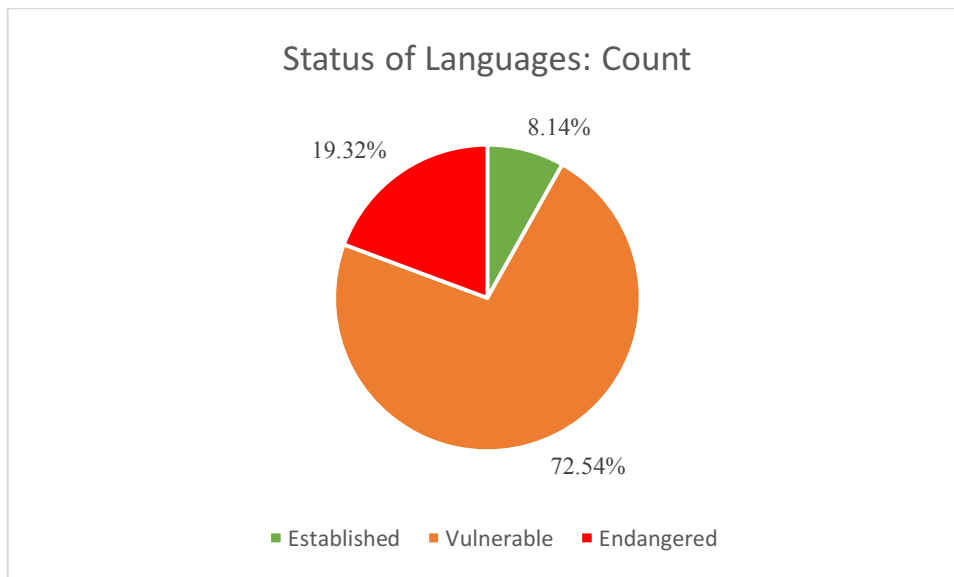
simplified 3-point scale, which classifies living languages are either 'Established, Vulnerable or Endangered'.

To facilitate this, the classifications are defined in broader terms. For example, an Established language is defined as being spoken by all generations (i.e. grandparents, parents, and children), used by the government, and in education, healthcare and commerce. In contrast, in Vulnerable languages most (but not all) children speak their mother-tongue, but its usage might be restricted to certain domains (i.e. it might not be the language of government, education, healthcare and commerce); in effect, being a language for 'inside the home'. Endangered covers cases where a specific language: (a) is no longer passed down to children as a 'mother-tongue', (b) parents understand the language, but it's use is limited to conversing with the 'older generations'; or, (c) the speakers are grandparents and/or it's spoken infrequently or with partial fluency.

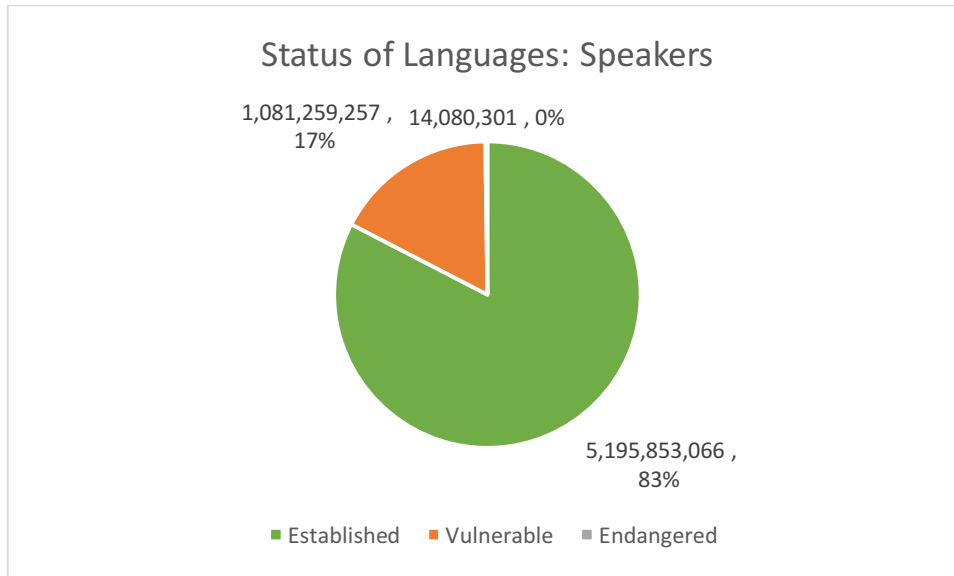
This simplified scale provides the following table of results:

Status	Number of Languages		Number of Speakers	
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent
Established	578	8.14%	5,195,853,066	82.59%
Vulnerable	5,152	72.54%	1,081,259,257	17.19%
Endangered	1,372	19.32%	14,080,301	0.22%
Totals	7,102	100.00%	6,291,192,624	100.00%

The following graphic looks at this from a 'language count' perspective:

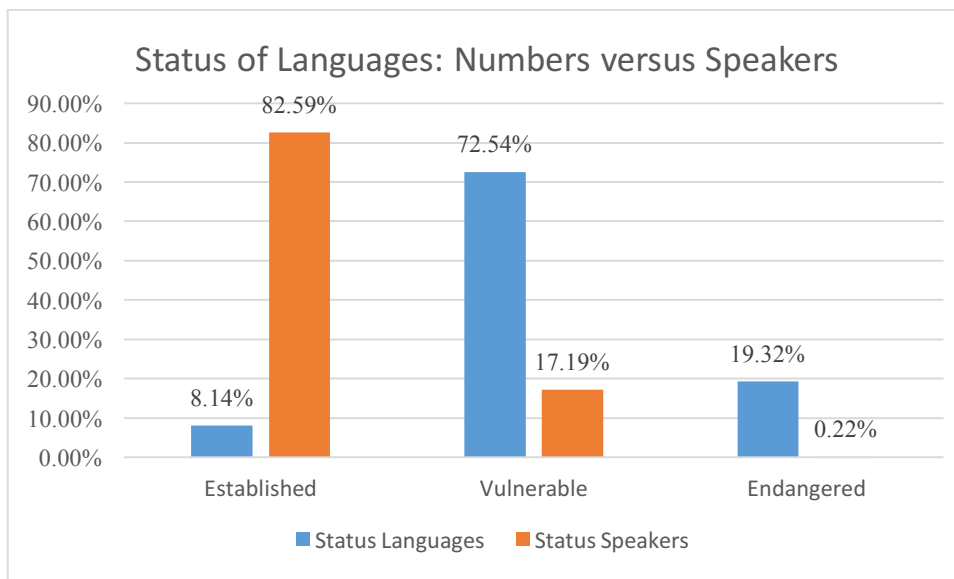


The following graphic looks at this from a 'speakers' perspective:



note: Endangered speakers total 0.22% and therefore 'rounds to zero'.

The following graphic compares and contrasts the number of languages / speakers:



This simplistic overview of living language, is the proverbial picture that paints a thousand words.

The harsh truth is 578 languages are Established (8.14% of languages), and, in a broad sense, considered strong enough to withstand change in the foreseeable future. In simple terms, much of the reason for is 'strength in numbers'; after all, Established languages represent 5.196 billion speakers (82.59% of population). Furthermore, Established languages are entrenched in the fabric of the countries in which they are spoken, as the language of choice for government, education, healthcare and commerce et al. In this regard, they are impervious to the effects of change; at least, for the foreseeable future.

In stark contrast to this group are the 1,372 Endangered languages (19.32% of languages),

inexorable decline and eventual extinction. I'm guessing the foreseeable death of 1,372 living languages is shocking to most readers, right? In some regards, we – the human race – are more knowledgeable about endangered species of flora and fauna, than we are about our own culture. Most of us are aware of the plight of giant pandas and polar bears, but – can you name a single endangered language? Once again, it seems we are taking language for granted. Perhaps, this too is a numbers game; after all, these 1,372 languages account for a mere 14.080 million speakers (0.22% of speakers). On a graph, or as a standalone number, 0.22% seems inconsequential; nothing more than a rounding error. Yet, from a 'human value' perspective, the demise of these languages would effectively signal the end of 100s and 100s of 'cultures and civilisations'.

If you search Google for the term 'endangered languages', there are a number of somewhat bleak predictions for the future of language. According to some academics, we could lose 50% to 90% of languages by the end of this century. In these terms, the potential 'social and cultural' loss seems to be of unquantifiable magnitude. At this point in human evolution, though, language is making another quantum leap, as vast tomes of content are migrated to the Internet. As of May-2015, and using Wikipedia as a proxy for language proliferation in the digital world, there are a grand total of 291 local-language Wikis, noting there are just 12 languages with more than 1 million articles in their own language.

Language	Language (local)	Wiki	Articles	Total
English	English	en	4,879,550	36,368,503
Swedish	Svenska	sv	1,966,466	4,588,062
Dutch	Nederlands	nl	1,822,581	3,485,933
German	Deutsch	de	1,819,067	5,185,869
French	Français	fr	1,627,534	7,501,081
Waray-Waray	Winaray	war	1,259,089	2,868,698
Russian	Русский	ru	1,224,638	4,292,845
Cebuano	Sinugboanong Binisaya	ceb	1,211,256	2,793,287
Italian	Italiano	it	1,200,992	4,047,260
Spanish	Español	es	1,177,717	5,063,613
Vietnamese	Tiếng Việt	vi	1,133,341	3,048,441
Polish	Polski	pl	1,113,994	2,309,212

If there are only 291 local-language Wikis, does this mean c.50% of the 578 established languages are no longer safe? Are we seeing a further polarization of language, as the human populous vote with their fingers – choosing to create (or not create) content in their preferred language? Of course, 291 languages is just 4% of the world's living languages – so, what does this mean for the others? Given this statistic, perhaps even a 90% death-rate could be considered conservative! After all, the Internet is becoming the central source of information for government, education, healthcare and commerce; those languages that do not jump across the digital divide will face a challenging road ahead. If these trends don't change, perhaps – in the not-too-distant digital future – 96% of our languages will sit alongside Cuneiform and Sanskrit as relics from a previous age.

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