

7.3 Endangered Languages

key words: world languages, endangered languages, bilingualism

In the next century, linguists say that over half of the world's 7000 languages will disappear. They will no longer have any speaker. Why do languages die? And what is lost when they do?

Throughout human history, the languages of the most powerful groups have spread, while those of smaller, less powerful groups have become extinct. As those dominant languages spread, children grow up using that language instead of the language of their parents. Over time, a language can disappear completely. Although this has always been the case, there has been a huge increase over the last 100 years or so in the rate at which languages are disappearing forever.

Do you think it matters if languages disappear? Why or why not?

Conduct some research to see if there are endangered languages near you. How many speakers are left? Is the language being recorded and documented? Are children being encouraged to speak the language?

[Teacher Notes: Since language and culture are intimately intertwined, the loss of language can mean the loss of culture. Words that describe certain cultural practices or classifications or ideas may be lost in translation. Many endangered languages have not been written, so with the loss of language, and entire culture, including its history, stories, and songs is not easily transmitted to the next generation. Also, a lot of what we know about language is encoded only in oral languages. "Indigenous groups that have interacted closely with the natural world for thousands of years often have profound insights into local lands, plants, animals, and ecosystems—many still undocumented by science. Studying indigenous languages therefore benefits environmental understanding and conservation efforts. Studying various languages also increases our understanding of how humans communicate and store knowledge. Every time a language dies, we lose part of the picture of what our brains can do." (from The Enduring Voices project: <http://travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/enduring-voices/>)]