



# The Sense of Danger:

Language, Life & Literature

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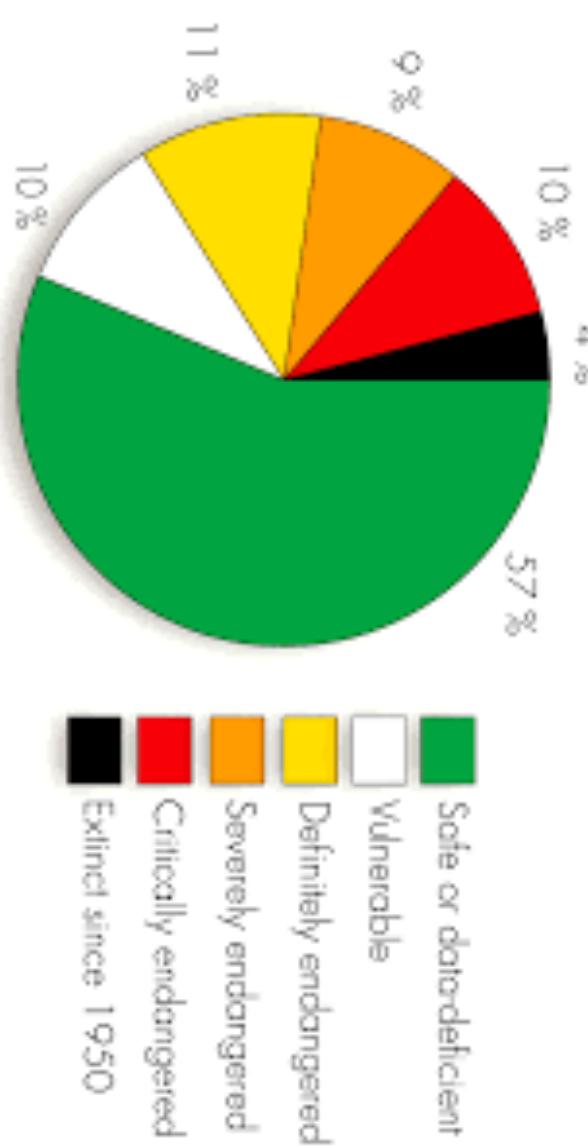


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# The World Scenario

**In the “developed” world, the ills of so-called development has seen the decline and disappearance of smaller languages and linguistic groups. The world statistics is an eye-opener.**



## Endangered Languages by Region

| Region         | # Extinct | % Extinct |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| Siberia/Alaska | 45/50     | 90        |
| USA/Canada     | 149/187   | 80        |
| Mesoamerica    | 50/300    | 17        |
| South America  | 110/400   | 27        |
| Australia      | 225/250   | 90        |
| Russia         | 45/65     | 70        |

It is unfortunately true that very few people (including most of their own speakers) care about the impending demise of small languages.

Joshua Fishman 1995, On the limits of ethnolinguistic democracy, p. 60.



# Linguistically Diverse 8 Countries in the world

**Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, India,  
Indonesia, Mexico, New Guinea, and  
Nigeria – all marked red here**

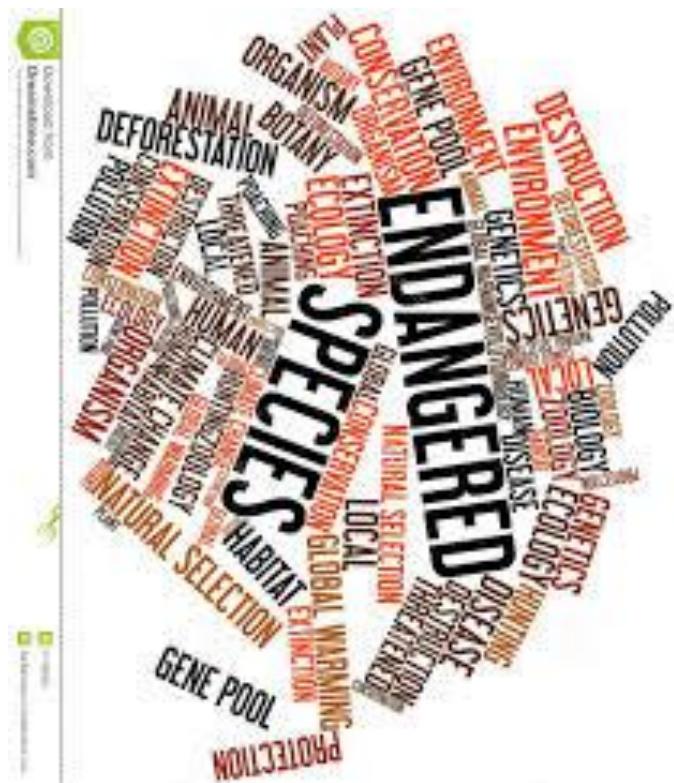


**Criticality of Language Endangerment depends upon many of these factors -**

- Intergenerational Transmission* (Is the language passed on to younger generations?)
- Active Speakers/Users and Correlation with Age* (How old are the youngest speakers?)
- Absolute number of speakers* (Below a critical level, say 5k or 10k, the alarm signal is on)
- Speaker number trends* (Is the number of speakers declining in every decade, or is stable or increasing?)
- Domains of use of the language* (Is the language only used in informal contexts or for many or all domains in life)
- Trend of Bi- or Multilingualism*
- Is it a School language, or language of mass media?*

# The RED ALERT

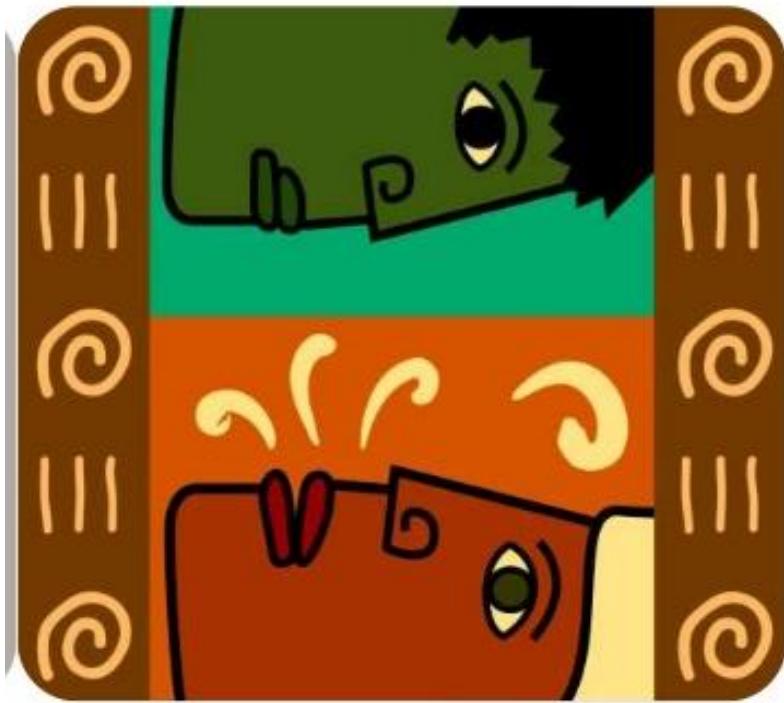
- The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources in [www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org)) – while announcing a ‘red list of threatened species’ mentioned that 21% of the Mammals, 12% of birds and 4% of the fishes are nearly extinct.



- **Soundi**ng the same red alert in the area of language and ethnicity, an Ethnologue expert, M.P.Lewis (2009) had pointed out that 516 of the world's languages, i.e 8.6% are nearly extinct – where 170 of them are located in the two Americas – North and South, 210 are in the Pacific, 78 in Asia, 46 in Africa and 12 in Europe. For extinct or nearly extinct languages – such as Kusunda in Nepal, one can only prepare a documentation if there are anthropological or linguistic field studies done before they disappeared.

# David Crystal on 'Language Death' (2000)

- While talking about 'Language Death,' and possible reasons, David Crystal narrates several stories that were presented by scholars in different Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL) Conferences. In one, a linguist and a common friend, Ole Stig Anderson laments that on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1992 when he went to record Tevfik Esseng, the last speaker of Ubuh, a West Caucasian language, he found that Tevfik passed away that morning.
- In another instance, Bruce Connell narrated that when he went to the Mambilla region of Cameroon, he met with Bogon, the last active speaker of Kasabe (also called Luo) but when he returned later to record, the last man had died leaving behind his sister who could only understand the language, and not speak it.
- Crystal then began with the question of the variation in the estimated figure of total number of languages in the world – varying from 3000 to 10,000.



- **William Dwight Whitney** started with 1000 languages, **Frederick Bodmar** gave the number as 1500, whereas **Mario Pei** had proposed a figure of 2796. **Joshua Whatmough** (1956) came up with 3000. But the *Ethnologue* upped the figure at 5687 and later in its 13<sup>th</sup> edition to 6,703. The **UNESCO** *Atlas* shows 6,796 languages in all.

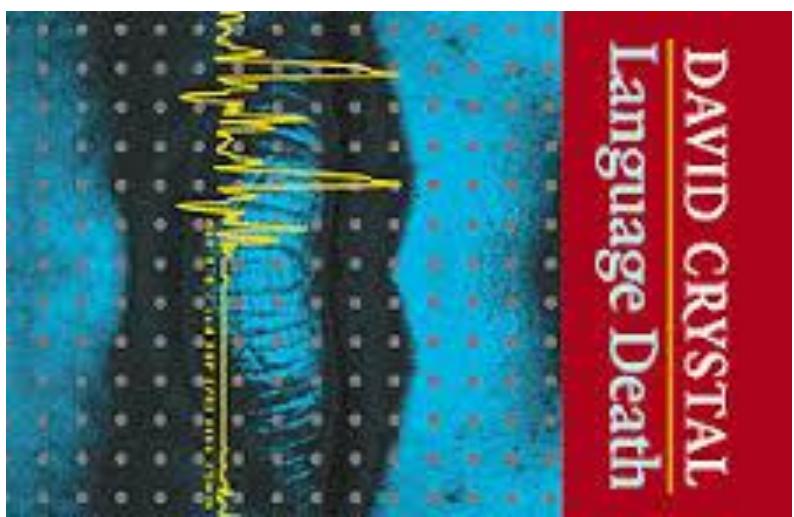
- May be, the alarm bell rang because the number varied from time to time. So the commentators might have over-estimated. Also because proper linguistic surveys were not done in all parts

- Reports of unverified new labels, or discovery of new languages keeps on being reported, thus increasing the number.

- Classification and categorization of languages or dialects under languages, or mother-tongues also raise problems of a kind that affect these figures.

- Death of a speaker is understandable. Wiping off of an entire culture or community is painful.

## The Number



# WHY HELP SAVE LANGUAGES?

- 1. Just as retaining ecological diversity is essential so that all living organisms, including animals (and of course, human beings and their types) plants and herbs as well as bacteria survive with their complex network of relationships, where harming any one species could create irreparable damage to the whole system, one must accept that biological and cultural diversities are inseparable. If one takes up deforestation on a large scale – visible in many parts of Central India, it will dislodge many tribal hamlets uprooting them from the forests and turning them into a mere labor-force with dispersion and identity crisis of unprecedented kind. Genetic diversity helps in our natural evolution where the next generation adapts to changes in order to survive in the changing times and environments because Diversity contains potential for adaptation, and that is what helps in long-term survival.
- 2. The shared memory and history as well as shared cultural practices gives an Identity to the ethnic group, including their linguistic identity, and all these provide them a natural security cover. Language is thus an index, symbol and marker of this identity.

# More Arguments

- 3. Languages are a link to the past – to the archive of knowledge bases, and to the history of the region. Nettle and Romaine (2000: 14) say that “every language is a living museum, a monument to every culture it has been vehicle to.” That is why when a language dies, the range, richness and wealth of its cultural history also dies out. Colin Baker (‘Foundations of Bilingual Education & Bilingualism’, *Multilingual Matters*, 2001: 194) claims that “this limits the choice of the ‘pasts’ to preserve, and the value of life – past and present. It is analogous to humanity losing one of its whole libraries built over years.” The death of a written language (such as Latin) may still be possible to regain through competent translation but loss of an oral tradition cannot be recovered at all, except from the memories of its last few speakers.
- 4. All human languages contribute to the totality of human knowledge as it exists at any given point of time. Therefore with the loss of a language, that part of the vision dies. Visions of the past added to expressions of social relationship, traditional knowledge base, organizational models, strategies of community living and friendship – including dispute redressal mechanisms, are all lost. In short, all its creativity including art, poetry, music, science, technology, and ideas about life, death and even language will all be gone.

# Ground Realities & Task at Hand

- 5. Languages are interesting objects of investigation in themselves with a complex network of sounds, word-formation rules, mechanisms of borrowing and innovation as well as given and new mechanisms of sentence formations. Our understanding of this rare faculty of man that separates humans from all other animals, namely, Language and its Structure would be enriched if there are more varieties. How many ways of signification could there be has always been a mystery linguists tried to resolve.

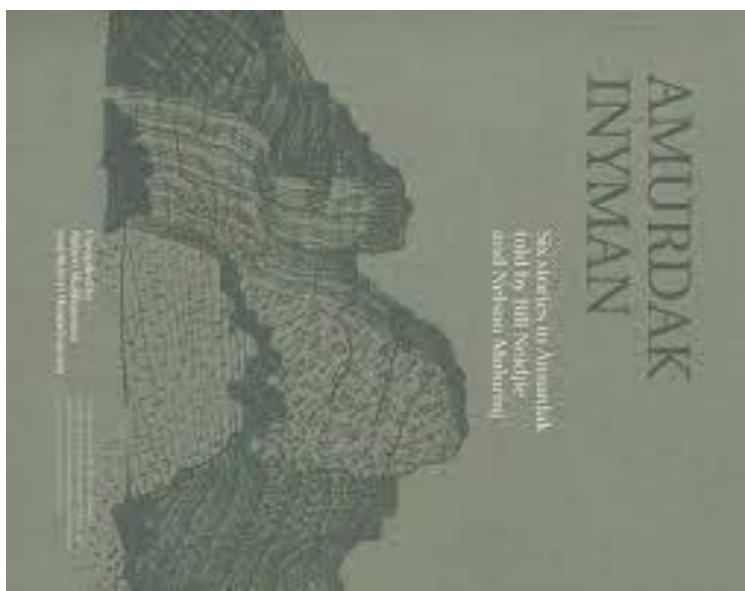
Christopher Moosely (*Encyclopedia of the World's Endangered Languages*, 2007, Taylor & Francis) says: "Language has always been a powerful weapon in the subjugation of peoples and nations. Empires have come and gone by the sword, but their true staying power, their lasting influence over many generations, long after the trappings of government and formal administration have disappeared, lies in the power of language."

It is not surprising that Ofelia Zepeda and Jane A. Hill 1991: 136 ('The condition of Native American languages in the United States' In R. H. Robins and E. M. Uhlenbeck, eds., *Endangered Languages* Oxford/New York: Berg, pp. 135-155) would lament by saying that... "The loss of the hundreds of languages that have already passed into history is an intellectual catastrophe in every way comparable in magnitude to the ecological catastrophe we face today".

## An Example from Australia



- Bob Holman flies to the Australian outback and meets Charlie Mangulda, an Aboriginal songman (read “poet”), who is the only person left on our planet who speaks Amurdak. When Charlie is gone, except in the notebooks and recordings of linguists, Amurdak will disappear with him. Through Charlie, we begin to understand the poignancy of language loss.
- With linguist Nick Evans, Holman flies to Goulburn Island off the coast of Northern Australia where he meets a community of 400 people speaking ten languages, many endangered, all vulnerable.



# NEW ASSESSMENT of Endangerment

- Michael E. Krauss (1934), a specialist of 19 Alaskan Languages (worked on Eyak which died by 2008), in his talk at the Linguistic Society of America 1991 meeting, was among the first to create an awareness of the global problem of endangered languages.
- In his 1992 paper - *The World's Languages in Crisis* Krauss arrived at this estimate based on the best available sources at that time that 50-90% of the world's languages would be extinct by the end of the century.
- The Endangered Languages Catalogue (ELCat) project of the Univ of Hawai'i at Manoa and Eastern Michigan University with NSF support) re-looked at the prediction in March 2013 and found that "Krauss' estimates were too high," and that "a total of 3,176 can be considered to be endangered. This is about 46% of all living languages..."
- [<http://rosettaproject.org/blog/2013/mar/28/new-estimates-on-rate-of-language-loss/>]

# Survival & Revival

- There could be situations where a language is doing well in terms of number or frequency of use in one country but is endangered elsewhere. One example of that is Welsh in the UK where Welsh with its 674,000 people has made a comeback thanks to the efforts of the Government (such as through the implementation of a *Welsh Language Scheme*), whereas Welsh is also spoken in Argentina in the small colony of Patagonia. Today there are still around 5,000 people who speak Welsh in that region.

- Other perfect example of a revival of vanishing languages include the stories of Scottish Gaelic, Irish Gaelic and Cornish in the UK.

- the Basque people, who live in the mountainous region of southern France and northern Spain — is reviving a language that many once feared would die out.

[\[http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/article24526084.html\]](http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/article24526084.html)



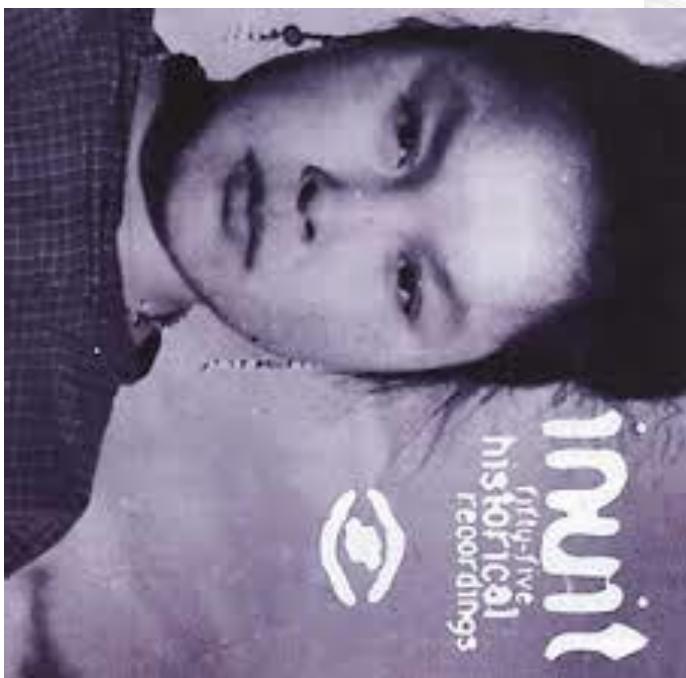
# Greenlandic

Kate Yorder, in a story, raises this issue on Oct 12, 2016 in the context of Greenland: **As ice melts and seas rise, can endangered languages survive?** And let me quote her: “Wherever you are in Greenland, the way the wind feels can place you in relation to the sea and the ice.

The Inuit have relied for nearly a thousand years on tiny nuances in the breeze to guide them on foggy, starless nights, and they gave these winds special names. A single word, *isersarneq*, communicates something like: “This is a wind in the fjord that comes in from the sea, and it can be hard to get home, but once you get out of the fjord, it’s nice weather.”

But recently, as the winds change and become unpredictable, these terms are disappearing.”

<http://grist.org/justice/as-ice-melts-and-seas-rise-can-endangered-languages-survive/>



• Though it's not a perfect measure, language is one of the best ways we know to gauge cultural diversity. It is this diversity that is in danger. The *Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages* says: "People have an incentive to adopt languages of power, ones that have come to dominate through colonization with higher status and better job opportunities.

• But If you're well versed in the effects of climate change, and we see more intense storms, rising seas, prolonged droughts, and the spread of infectious diseases — all of which can, in turn, lead to chaos, conflicts, and migration, people settle in a new place, and begin a new life, complete with new surroundings, new traditions, and a new language.

• In Greenland. In the last four years, more than 1 trillion tons of ice have melted. As Greenland's environment is transformed, plant and animal communities are reshuffling faster than almost anywhere on Earth. Polar bears are moving south, mosquitoes are proliferating, new fish species are arriving, rain is falling erratically, and the air is getting more humid.

• "The connection between Greenlanders and the animals is absolutely central — just as central as their language to how they identify as Greenlanders," says Ross Virginia, director of the Institute of Arctic Studies at Dartmouth.

• As climate change impacts the life and land around us, it shapes where we go, what we eat, how we talk, and who we are.

## The Greenlan d Saga

# Example of Marshallese

- On the other side of the globe, Greenland's melting ice is contributing to a similar existential crisis in the Marshall Islands. The chain of low-lying coral atolls stationed between Hawaii and Australia is experiencing a mass migration on the level of the exodus seen during the Irish Potato Famine. A fifth of the population left the country between 1990 and 2011, and climate change is increasingly a factor in the decision to relocate.
- As the ocean swallows up the sandy islands, flooding streets with sewage and inundating freshwater supplies, people will be forced to migrate, likely to the United States. The largest population of Marshallese outside of the islands is in Springdale, Arkansas. There, Marshallese immigrants would likely assimilate and lose their traditional language within the span of a few generations.
- “There’s definitely the sense that if you don’t speak Marshallese, you’re not really a Marshallese person,” says Peter Rudiak-Gould, an anthropologist who has studied the Marshall Islands for 10 years. “The culture couldn’t really survive without language.”

# Survival Strategies

- Climate change and Emigration can both threaten languages, but so can migration. Greenland, with only 50,000 residents, is facing a veritable invasion of foreign workers flocking to the small country to take advantage of opportunities opened by the retreating ice, largely in oil and mineral extraction. The boom is catapulting Greenland into 21st century geopolitics.
- “This would be massive social disruption,” Lenore Grenoble says. It’s a controversial topic at the moment. Some Greenlanders want to take the opportunity to claim their economic independence, while others are worried that foreign contact would threaten their identity. If huge numbers of workers speaking foreign languages come to the country, nothing is certain.
- Greenland is strengthening itself against this tide, defending its language the way an island might bolster its eroding shoreline by trucking in sand.
- The government is replacing Danish place names with the traditional Inuit ones, translating written materials into Greenlandic, and ensuring the language is used in schools. There’s even a language committee that legislates new words. Katti Frederikson, the head of the language secretariat, helps develop and approve new Greenlandic terminology for all sorts of subjects: economics, science, mining industries, and law.

# Could there be a comeback?



- The *Linguistic Society of America* (LSA) created a campaign to educate members of the U.S. Congress about the benefits of Native American language revitalisation.
- Two bills have already been proposed to both Houses of Congress about this.
- The former President, Barack Obama, had openly supported the importance of the preservation of Native American languages and cultures during a 2014 town hall meeting.
- What are we doing in India?

All smaller and threatened linguistic groups need:

- Grammars for documentation, including Social grammars for registers & contexts
- Primers & Language games to introduce them in elementary education
- Graded teaching/learning materials to participate in next level of education
- Writing Systems reflecting their phonetics
- Literacy books for adult learners
- General Purpose Dictionaries (linking up with English, Hindi & Regional languages)
- Thesauri or WordNet linking up synonymy
- Specialized Glossary for domains & knowledge translation
- Cultural & visual documentation
- Style Manuals leading to standardization
- Encouragements for literary activities

# WHAT IS DOABLE!

## What if we don't make any such attempts?

- As I had argued earlier, the result of long years of negligence could lead to large-scale dislocation of such speakers and speech groups.
- Demographers, Economists and Social Engineers will perhaps tell us that 'displacement' of human aggregates cannot be avoided. It is perhaps in the nature of man and his products ('social formations') to face this constant predicament of being 'displaced'.
- However, an unplanned and unbalanced displacement can also kill a literature, culture and their medium – that is, language, with all its world of wonder. Consequently, the social agglomeration that is responsible for maintenance of this language as a social contract will also disappear.
- Today, forced displacement is on the rise for various reasons.

## Towards a Responsible Linguistics

# Power to Dislodge or Displace

- Every year, a significant number of people are forced to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, and look for a space in an alien land.
- But there is a still larger number who become displaced within their own geo-space, a trend that is growing world-wide.
- In general, they leave to avoid armed conflict, or a possible violence, because of natural or man-made disasters, and because of violation of their rights.

# Net Effects of Displacement

- Marginalization of the Speech Group

## PLUS

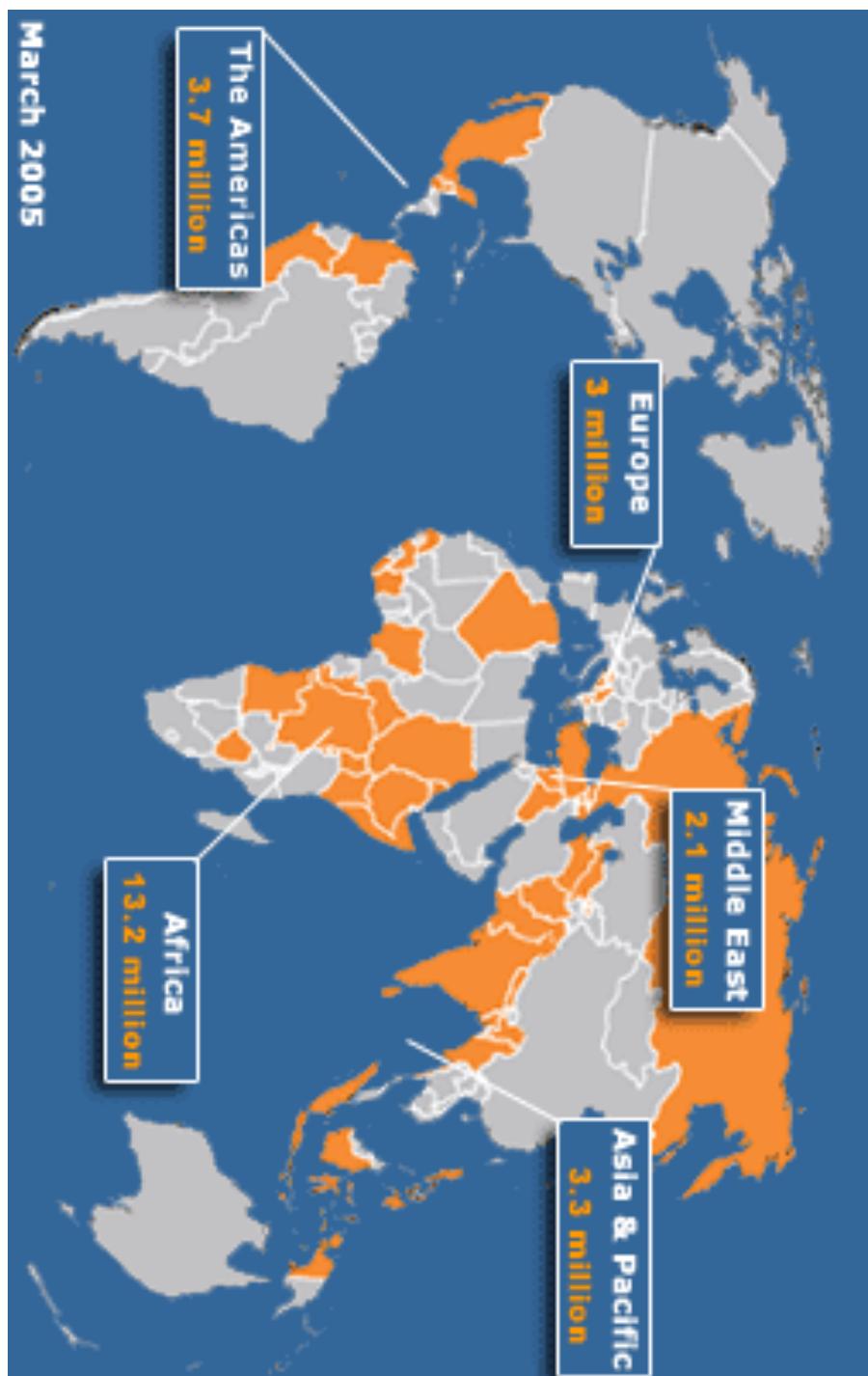
- Increased mortality
- Chances of morbidity
- Food Insecurity
- Breakdown of values
- Split families
- Social disorganization
- Loss of indigenous languages, and
- Pidginization of speech

# Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: A Growing Trend

| Year | Refugees            | Internally Displaced   |
|------|---------------------|------------------------|
| 1970 | <b>9 million</b>    | <b>5 million</b>       |
| 1980 | <b>14 million</b>   | <b>9 million</b>       |
| 2000 | <b>16 million</b>   | <b>22 - 25 million</b> |
| 2004 | <b>13.2 million</b> | <b>25 million</b>      |

Statistics based on IDMC (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre) figures

# Internal Displacement WORLD WIDE



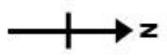
- Africa is by far the region most affected by internal displacement, with large-scale situations such as Sudan (6 million IDPs). Some of the hardest hit countries outside Africa are: Colombia, Turkey, Indonesia, India, Burma.
- While an estimated 3 million IDPs were able to return to their homes during 2004, another 3 million people were newly displaced at the same time (in particular as a result of the crisis in Darfur-Sudan)
- For many countries, figures available are only estimates, as IDPs have not been registered nor counted.

# Lessons for the Students of Endangered Languages

- Many sociolinguists (Pandit, P.B. 1976 *Language in Plural Society*, New Delhi: Manohar ; Srivastava, R.N. 1976) claimed that compared to others, for South Asian immigrants, language retention was more natural than language loss.
- But in reality, **the 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> generation migrants adopt other tongues/regional languages** and are assimilated. Yet nobody likes the loss of their language & cultural identity
- In my 2009-paper - **The Sense of Danger: An Overview of Endangered Languages of India.** (In Kamalini Sengupta, eds. *Endangered Languages of India*. 39-56. New Delhi: INTACH), **certain cluster of pockets arise in the country**, and a set of consortia might be best suited to tackle the task, and hence this classification of research groups.
- One can evolve a simple test –based on losses of vital linguistic features to assess the ‘Distress signals.’
- It is also important to understand that ‘Linguistic Documentation’ of Endangered Languages cannot be an end in itself – howsoever important it may be for a linguistic theoretician or a typologist.

# LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT IN INDIA – AS PER UNESCO ATLAS

Map of India



NEEDED

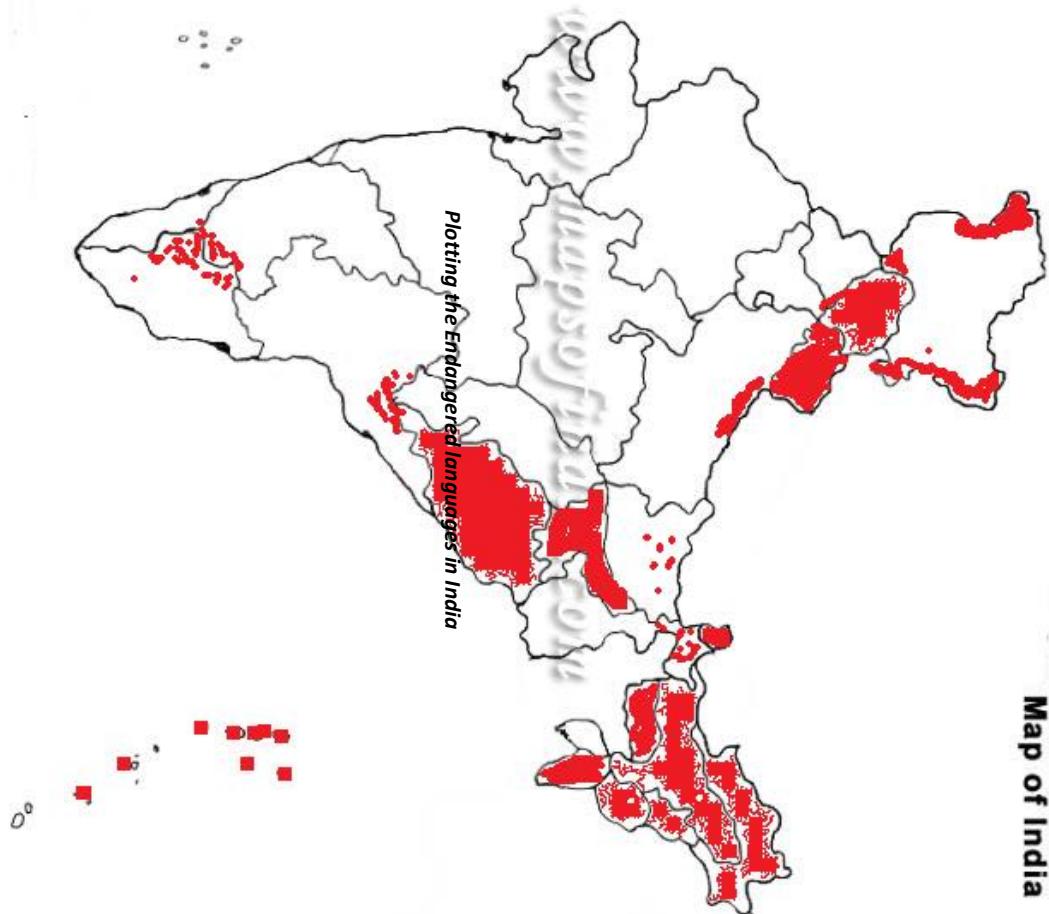
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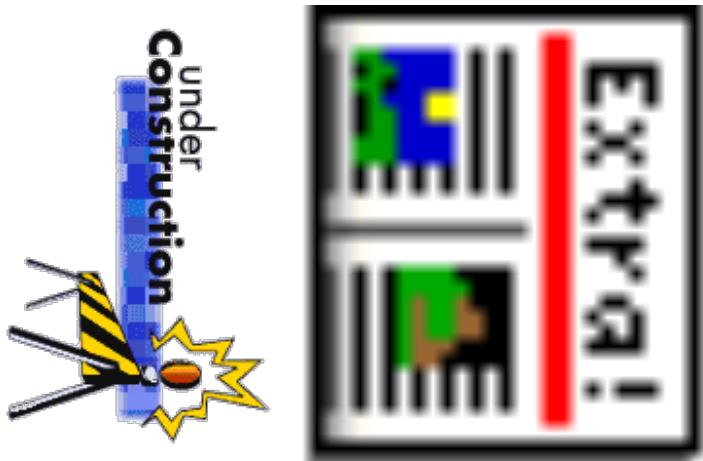
Map not to Scale

Plotting the Endangered languages in India



## Two-fold Objectives:

- There are **two issues** of importance here:
  - The first one is of theoretical importance and also a challenge for all practitioners of language management, namely, **how could we develop smaller languages and their culture in a diverse space - a space where number and economic development seem to be intertwined & important?**
  - Secondly, given the profile of such smaller and lesser-known (and often, least cared for) languages and culture of India, **can language technology help in identifying them, changing their status and plight?**



# Why Methodology Workshop? Or, why Correlation is important? What Theory?

- To start with, a series of methodology workshops would be needed, which should also produce a set of handbooks and field manuals, moving out of CIL's *Linguistic Survey Questionnaire* of 1980s, Bernard Comrie & Norval Smith's *Lingua Descriptive Studies: Questionnaire* (North-Holland, 1977) or Anvita Abbi's *Lincon Europa Book - A Manual of Linguistic Field Work and Indian Language Structures* (2001), or CIEL, Visva-Bharati's *Action Manual* (2017).
- Most importantly, we need a secured **Geo-tagged GIS-based Data Collection method** with data upload on a common format, followed by data cleaning, transcribing, tagging and corpus-building ready for grammatical analysis and lexicon-building. We must produce results based on actual field work and not on stationary data collection techniques often used by armchair linguists.
- We should keep tab on what is happening under the **Mother-Tongue Survey** of the Census Language Division (**MTSI**) where work has covered already 250 plus mother-tongues, or of CIL's Project titled **SPPEL** which began working on 70 out of 520 mother-tongues CIL identified, and one should try to build up further on these here.