

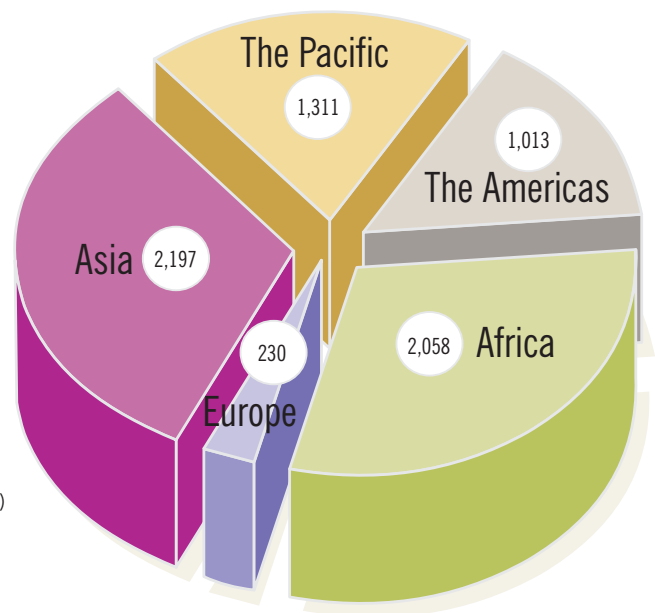
# A Loss for Words

Unprecedented numbers of languages are endangered. Languages die for a number of reasons—war, genocide, disease, low birth rates, government writ. But globalization may now pose the biggest threat of all. As the world becomes more intertwined, many of those who speak minority languages, especially the young, often begin to regard their native tongues as economic and social liabilities and stop using them. Of the 6,800 known living languages, more than 400 are believed to be on the verge of extinction (defined as having just a few remaining speakers, all of them elderly), about a quarter of them are used by fewer than 1,000 people, and probably half will be gone by the end of the 21st century. | **By Nicholas Ostler**

**Living Languages by Location**

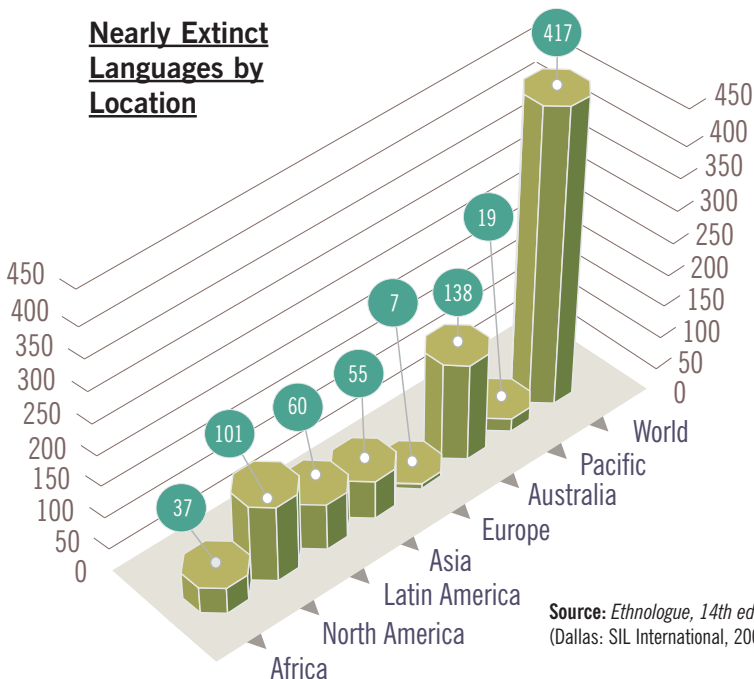
## Where Languages Live

Ecological and linguistic vibrancy are closely linked. The areas richest in bird and mammal life tend to be those least touched by modernity, and this isolation permits a wealth of languages to survive. Most of the world's rare languages can be found along the equator, in tropical settings that are mountainous or heavily forested. Papua New Guinea, for instance, boasts 832 living languages, while Indonesia has more than 700. Conversely, regions with many endangered and extinct species are usually also linguistically vulnerable.



Source: *Ethnologue*, 14th ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2000)

**Nearly Extinct Languages by Location**



Source: *Ethnologue*, 14th ed. (Dallas: SIL International, 2000)

## Where Languages Die

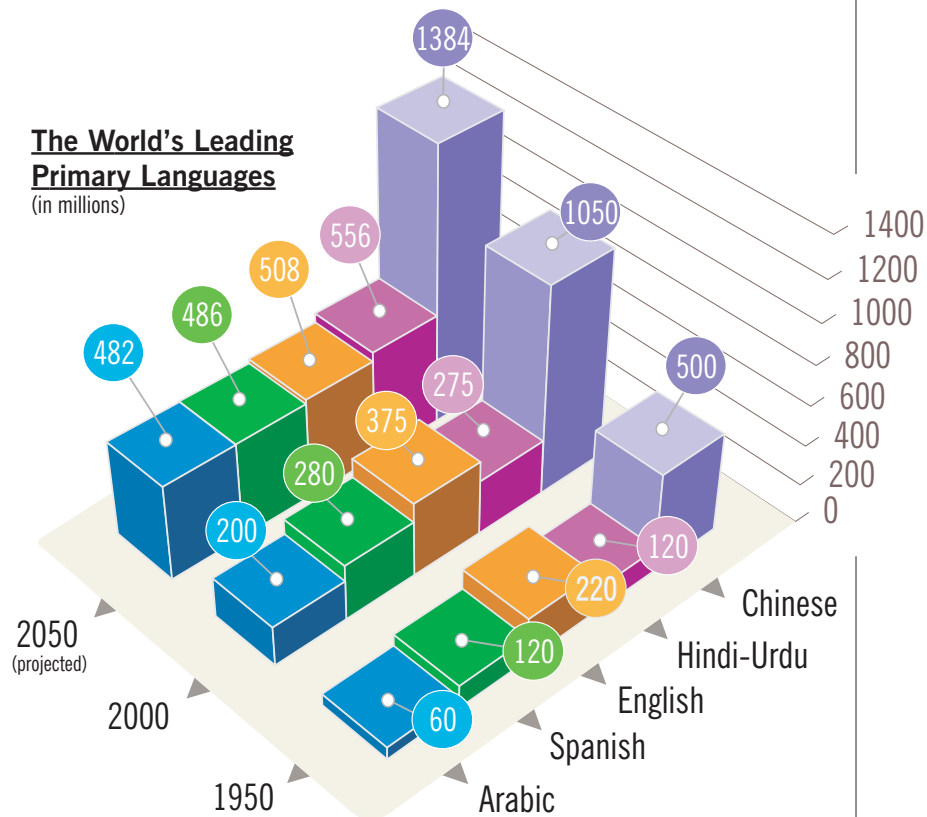
The greatest concentration of endangered languages is in the English-speaking world; this fact can be directly attributed to colonization. Even though the United States, Canada, and Australia—all former British colonies—claim only about 8 percent of the world's living languages, together they are home to more than half of the languages currently on the critical list. For instance, 138 of Australia's 261 aboriginal languages are now nearly extinct.

Nicholas Ostler is president of the U.K.-based Foundation for Endangered Languages. His book on the linguistic history of the world is due out in 2004 by Harper Collins.

## Keep Babel-ing

English, the lingua franca of global commerce, will not become the dominant spoken form of the 21st century. Chinese, already the most popular tongue, will have nearly triple the number of speakers that English does by 2050, and Hindi-Urdu, Spanish, and Arabic will all have nearly caught up to English. Far from embracing a single language, the world's population will be more evenly divided among several major tongues. This change will mirror what happened in Europe following the advent of printing in the 15th century, a communications revolution as momentous as the spread of the Internet. Printing did not reinforce the then international language, Latin, but led to its replacement by the many vernaculars that became the modern European languages.

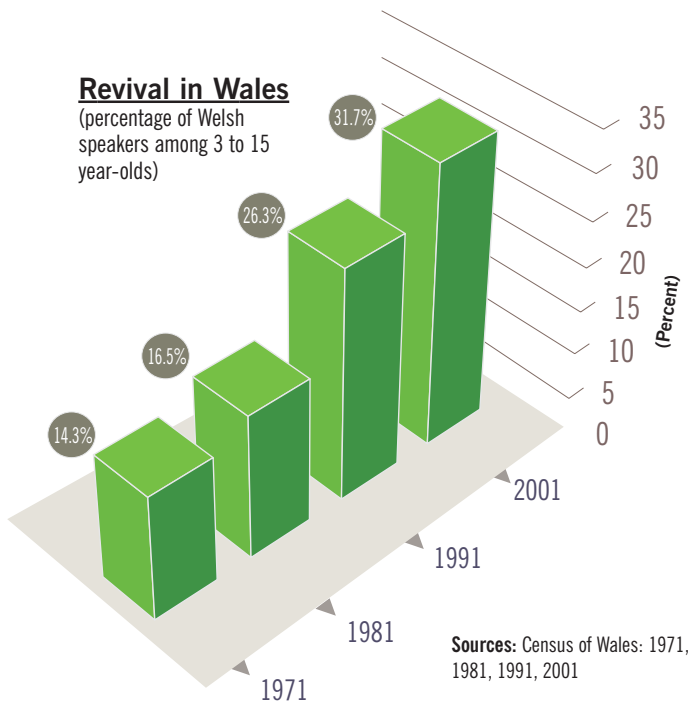
**The World's Leading Primary Languages**  
(in millions)



Source: David Graddol's *The Future of English?* (London: British Council, 1997)

## Revival in Wales

(percentage of Welsh speakers among 3 to 15 year-olds)



Sources: Census of Wales: 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001

## A Bit of Welsh Less Rare

Greater balance among the major languages won't save the many minor languages in jeopardy, but endangered ones can be turned around. A case in point is Welsh. The use of Welsh in Britain long predates the use of English, but the language went into decline as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution and greater mobility inside and outside Wales. However, in the last two decades, Welsh authorities have made a concerted and very successful effort to sustain the native tongue. Welsh now figures much more prominently on local radio and television and in school curricula. Knowledge of the language is compulsory for many government jobs. Far from being a liability, the revival of Welsh has coincided with the achievement of greater autonomy for Wales and a period of strong economic growth there.

## Saving What's Spoken

Growing awareness of the plight of minor languages and of the cultural disaster their extinction will represent is prompting international agencies, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), along with some specialized funds and nongovernmental organizations to take up the challenge of documenting them. The task is expensive and daunting: It costs around \$200,000 to create a record of a language in both its written and spoken forms, and some 3,000 languages have yet to be preserved. But such an effort could make globalization less threatening to communities that otherwise stand to benefit from the world's growing interconnectedness.

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