A Global Dataset on Language Vitality

Ethnologue provides a global dataset on the vitality of languages as assessed via the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). This study looks at all languages identified in ISO 639-3 that were in use in the year 1700 (n = 7,517). Figure 1 shows their vitality distribution by present-day EGIDS level. As illustrated, 4,199 languages (or 56%) are still in vigorous use by all ages.

![Vitality Summary](image)

**Figure 1: Present-day vitality of languages known to be living in 1700**

The spreading doom of language loss

A language is “doomed” in Krauss’s terms when the youngest speakers are young adults; this is (EGIDS 7).

A generation later, they are middle-aged (EGIDS 8a).

A generation later, they are elderly (EGIDS 8b).

A generation later, the last speaker has died (EGIDS 9).

Given the year the last speaker died, we can go back 3 generations (e.g. 75 years) to estimate when the language became doomed (i.e. reached EGIDS 7).

What does the data show?

Ethnologue has been able to ascertain the approximate year of death for 97% of the 716 languages that are indicated in black in Figure 1. The trend line shows a rate approaching 9 per year—or, one every 40 days.

![Language deaths per year](image)

**Figure 3: Language deaths per year**

The rate of language loss

Krauss gave a warning in 1992.4

• “The coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages.”

Crystal moderated this warning in 2000.4

• “50% loss…cannot be very far from the truth,” which would require that “at least one language must die, on average, every two weeks or so.”

But the press has incorrectly reported this as fact:

• “One language dies every 14 days.”

• About 3,700 hits result from this exact Google search.

Trends by Region

The sequence of maps in Figure 4 is like a movie that documents the spread of language doom since 1795. Each frame advances 25 years to the next generation. The final frame predicts the proportion of dead languages in 75 years. The projected rate of language loss at the close of the century is 17 languages per year. The Americas and Australia have led the global trend toward language loss. Sub-Saharan Africa (with 2,071 languages) stands out as the only major region where the rate of loss is still <10% as depicted in Figure 5.

![Language doom by region](image)

**Figure 5: Language doom by region**

The trend toward language doom has already peaked in the Americas and Australia and is little in evidence in sub-Saharan Africa. However, elsewhere, the doom of languages has risen at an alarming rate since 1950.