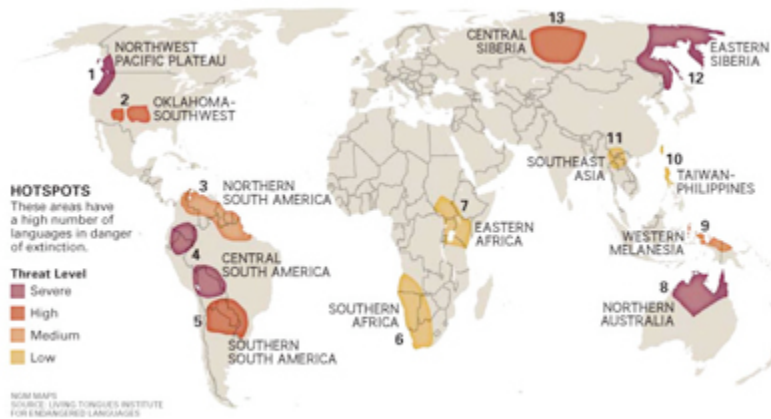


SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN

[60-Second Science Blog](#) - October 23, 2008

Speaking in tongues--3,500 fewer, that is

By Jordan Lite



There's a little bit of know-it-all *Cheers* postman [Cliff Claven](#) in all of us. So we were intrigued to learn of a little-known fact: Half of the planet's [7,000 languages are headed for extinction over the next century](#).

That [phenomenon](#), the result of aging populations in regions made remote by terrain or migration, will be put on display on a small scale today, when speakers of 100 or more languages [race to translate a speech](#) by linguist [K. David Harrison](#) within 72 hours. He'll describe the endangered

language problem at [PopTech](#), a three-day conference of leaders in science, business, technology and the arts in Camden, Maine.

The vanishing language trend is "a stunning fact," says Harrison, an associate professor at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania and author of the 2007 book [When Languages Die](#). "We don't even know what we're losing."

There are clues: Harrison draws a correlation between the decline in languages and species extinction. About [80 percent of plant and animal species are unclassified](#), partly because most scientists haven't bothered asking speakers of obscure languages about their environment and history that's been passed down only through oral — not written — traditions, he says. A nascent field, [ethnobotany](#), addresses that problem by studying the relationship between people and plants.

"There are deep interconnections between [ecosystems](#) in collapse and [climate change](#) and languages in collapse," he says. "Knowledge about species resides in small languages, and it's [knowledge science doesn't have yet](#)."

(Map of regions with high numbers of languages in danger of dying out, courtesy of Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages)