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More than half of the world's languages are in danger of extinction. While Wikipedia is available in 250 languages, there are an estimated 7,000 languages worldwide. Technology like Wikipedia plays an important part in the preservation battle. This means a lot of work ahead for the online encyclopedia.

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Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, is currently available in 250 languages. Each Wikipedia language version is self-governing and created by native speakers of a particular language. For many communities this had a tremendously positive affect, including bringing underrepresented languages to the digital arena.

"Bengali is ranked 7th in terms of native speakers. However, as a developing nation [Bangladesh], we are far behind many other nations because there is a huge digital divide. Bengali Wikipedia is the largest website in the Bengali language. The project serves as a sustainable information source for millions of poor village kids, who can not afford to buy even a single volume of a printed encyclopedia. It is also great to see my mother tongue in the digital realm", states Belayet Hossain, a contributor to the Bengali Wikipedia.

While Wikipedia's 250 language versions are a huge achievement, this number only represent a small fraction of the world's languages. There are an estimated 7,000 languages worldwide, half of which are dying at an alarming rate.

Dr. David Harrison, co-founder of the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, is one of the world's leading linguists investigating language extinction. He has a challenge for Wikipedia.

"Wikipedia has held up a magnifying glass to one corner of the universe. What they found is interesting, but let's not forget about the rest. My challenge is this - increase the number of Wikipedias to include languages not considered "top tier" languages, and help open doors by bringing smaller languages into the unicode system," states Harrison.

For some languages, Harrison states, Wikipedia will play a role in revitalizing them and perhaps helping prevent their extinction. He believes that this is important work, considering the amount of human knowledge that is lost every time a language dies.

"There are economies of information packaging, of knowledge, that you find in languages. Every language tells us some of the secrets of how humans have survived. When we lose a language we lose centuries of knowledge, of cultural ideas," Harrison says.

While there are many reasons languages die, primarily it is because speakers from a smaller language are overwhelmed with the dominant language they encounter in school, TV, etc. The trend has accelerated with the introduction of technologies like the internet since they tend to enforce certain "global" languages. This is especially true considering that certain languages have yet to be accepted into the Unicode System.

"Many bilingual native children abandon the language they speak at home because they don't see them compatible with the modern world. This is the case, for example, for a child that speaks Mayan at home, and encounters Spanish the rest of the day. As a result, they think that if only their parents speak X, it must be a lower language, and the language they see in the outside world, the global language, is the future. One way to counteract this is by letting them see their language in a high tech medium, such as Wikipedia," Harrison explains.

Harrison is careful to stress, however, that technology is still the domain of literate languages. This is an obstacle, considering that a large percentage of the world's languages have no writing systems. However, it is also possible that the lack of written materials may make oral languages more susceptible to extinction.

"Writing is not used in all languages, so there is an interesting question of inclusion. It will be interesting to see how Wikipedia tackles this. However, I have high hope that technology like Wikipedia will help open doors for many smaller languages…Wikipedia has done great things but there is so much more than can be done," Harrison states.

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