ASSESSING ENDANGERMENT: EXPANDING FISHMAN'S GIDS

M. PAUL LEWIS, GARY F. SIMONS

Abstract. Fishman's 8-level Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) has served as the seminal and best-known evaluative framework of language endangerment for nearly two decades. It has provided the theoretical underpinnings for most practitioners of language revitalization. More recently, UNESCO has developed a 6-level scale of endangerment. *Ethnologue* uses yet another set of five categories to characterize language vitality. In this paper, these three evaluative systems are aligned to form an amplified and elaborated evaluative scale of 13 levels, the E(xpanded) GIDS. Any known language, including those languages for which there are no longer speakers, can be categorized by using the resulting scale (unlike the GIDS). A language can be evaluated in terms of the EGIDS by answering five key questions regarding the identity function, vehicularity, state of intergenerational language transmission, literacy acquisition status, and a societal profile of generational language use. With only minor modification the EGIDS can also be applied to languages which are being revitalized.

INTRODUCTION

Language shift and death have long been a topic of discussion among sociolinguists, linguists, language planners, educators, and others. The result has been an extensive literature about the causes, processes, symptoms, and results of language loss and death (Denison 1977; Dorian 1977, 1980, 1981, 1987, 1989; Gal 1978; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

Joshua Fishman developed many of the major sociolinguistic concepts that inform our understanding of language use in society. *Reversing Language Shift* (Fishman 1991) represents the culmination of much of that work and is perhaps best known for the introduction of the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS).

Following the call from Krauss (1992) and others, nascent efforts at language maintenance and language revitalization were redoubled, particularly in North America. A variety of innovative approaches, including community-based language development and maintenance projects, have been implemented in an effort to stem the tide of language loss. Though some gainsay Krauss's prediction of massive language loss by the end of the current century, no credible arguments to the contrary have been forthcoming and the pace of language shift and death appears to be growing.

RRL, **LV**, *2*, p. 103–120, Bucureşti, 2010

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

The current edition of the Ethnologue (Lewis 2009) is the first in the more-than-50 year history of that publication in which the number of identified living languages has gone down. While many languages were newly identified in the most recent edition, a total of 91 were for the first time recorded as having no known remaining speakers. (Lewis 2009). We cannot conclude that this many languages have gone out of use in the four years since the previous edition since there is always a lag time in the reporting of data. Nevertheless, the number is sobering. Of the 6,909 living languages now listed in Ethnologue, 457 are identified as Nearly Extinct, a category which represents a severe level of endangerment. Less serious levels of endangerment are not currently distinguished in the Ethnologue. If small speaker population alone were taken as an indicator of language endangerment, the current worldwide count of languages with fewer than 10,000 speakers is 3,524 which amounts to just over 50% of the identified living languages in the world today.

Subsequent to the publication of Fishman's GIDS, other metrics for assessing the factors contributing to endangerment and vitality have been proposed (Brenzinger *et al.* 2003; Lewis 2008) yet the GIDS remains the foundational conceptual model for assessing the status of language vitality. In addition, *Ethnologue* has long used yet another scheme to categorize the language vitality status for each language it reports on.

Ten years after the publication of his initial volume on Reversing Language Shift, Fishman noted that within the ranks of Reversing Language Shift theory and practice to that point:

> …a noticeably under-represented focus is that of applied directions, priorities, and emphases. Actually, what seems to be most needed is a theoretically grounded thrust, derived from familiarity with a large number of cases of efforts on behalf of threatened languages in all parts of the world (therefore including experiences of developed, now developing and still little developed contexts)… (Fishman 2001).

In this paper we attempt to respond to that call by proposing an elaboration of the GIDS based on insights garnered from the extensive experience of the authors' host institution (SIL International) as reported in *Ethnologue* and by incorporating features of the subsequent and alternative approach to evaluation of endangerment developed by UNESCO.

FISHMAN'S GRADED INTERGENERATIONAL DISRUPTION SCALE (GIDS)

Fishman's GIDS focuses on the key role of intergenerational transmission in the maintenance of a language. If children do not learn a language from their parents, there is little possibility that they in turn will be able to pass the language on to their children. The GIDS not only takes into account that intergenerational

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

transmission is an individual decision made by parents, but also that societal and institutional choices are crucial in influencing the parental decisions regarding their language behavior in regard to their children. These societal factors create social spaces in which languages are used. These social spaces are what Fishman and others have identified as "domains of use", each constituting a constellation of participants, location, and topic that is closely associated with a particular language. That choice of language becomes sedimented over time as a social norm, so that the use of a particular language in a particular participant-location-topic context comes to be expected. If these norms of use begin to erode, language shift will begin as the language loses domains in which it is found to be useful and in which its use is expected.

As the number of domains associated with a language begins to diminish (that is, as the language loses uses), parents may decide that the language is a less valuable resource for their children than another language, and so the language begins to lose users as well. The GIDS provides a means of evaluating where a language is on this scale of disruption from full use by many users to no use by any users. Table 1 provides a summary of the GIDS in a way that recasts the definition of the levels more explicitly in terms of domains and salient language use patterns.

Table 1

Summary of Fishman's GIDS

GIDS	**(adapted from Fishman 1991)**
LEVEL	**DESCRIPTION**
1	The language is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level
2	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services
3	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders
4	Literacy in the language is transmitted through education
5	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form throughout the community
6	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language
7	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it with their elders but is not transmitting it to their children
8	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

From the perspective of assessing the status and vitality of languages, the GIDS is focused on the level of disruption more than on the level of maintenance. It can be read from top to bottom with analysts starting at the level of least disruption on the scale (Level 1), and reading down until they find the level of disruption that characterizes the situation that they are examining. Generally, the trend is that the trajectory of minoritized language communities is downwards on the scale and the descriptions of each stage are framed in terms of the loss of uses (functions, domains) and users. Fishman points out that the majority of minoritized communities are at Level 6, and since the focus of revitalization and maintenance efforts is to strengthen the status of the language, one could conclude there are 5 levels above that to be worked through in order to reach the safest status at Level 1. But the result is that this implied agenda for minority language revitalizers is virtually impossible, well beyond the reach of most language communities even with outside assistance.

While the GIDS, at its introduction almost two decades ago, provided new insights into the dynamics of language shift and its reversal, several shortcomings have become apparent as it has been applied in the context of efforts for language preservation, language revitalization, and language development. Application of the GIDS to specific situations has also resulted in some restatement and reformulation of the levels, particularly in the higher levels where the role, format, and nature of education become significant factors (see for example, King 2001).

First, the GIDS describes the levels of disruption in fairly static terms. While describing the changes taking place as intergenerational transmission is disrupted, it does not adequately account for the directionality of language shift versus language development. Thus a community that is at Level 6 but moving towards Level 7 (language shift in progress) requires a different set of interventions than one that is at Level 6 and moving towards Level 5 (language development in progress). An expansion of the GIDS at Level 6 is needed to allow for these distinctions.

Second, the GIDS does not provide an adequate description of all of the possible statuses of a language. At the upper end of the scale are a handful of languages that are international in scope and are thus stronger than Level 1. At the lower end of the scale are languages that are completely extinct and others that lie dormant as the heritage language of an active ethnic community. If the GIDS is to serve as a framework for describing languages at any and all stages of their life cycle, several additional levels must be distinguished.

Third, Fishman clearly identified intergenerational transmission of the language as the single most important factor in language shift. This implies that the locus of language revitalization efforts should be among individuals and within the home domain and local community. This is clearly the case for Level 6 and below. However, above Level 6 we see the increasingly important role of institutions outside of the home as transmission and use expand. While Levels 7 and below clearly deal with intergenerational disruption, Levels 5 and above are more

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

properly focused on institutional development as drivers for securing ever wider transmission. Fishman himself observed this distinction (Fishman 2001) but it is not clearly indicated in most representations of the GIDS. The formulation of the expanded GIDS makes the essential role of institutions (including the home) more explicit (in particular, higher level institutions outside the home) as a community moves towards the strongest levels of language use on the scale.

Fourth, and most notably, though ostensibly focused on the level of disruption, the original GIDS is least elaborated at the lowest end of the scale, where the levels of disruption are greatest. For the purposes of describing language shift and loss, this simpler set of categories may be all that is required. However, for the purposes of language revitalization, a more granular set of categories is more helpful. The elaboration of the GIDS that we are proposing provides a richer set of analytical categories and a clearer indication of what societal factors need to be addressed in each case.

UNESCO LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT FRAMEWORK

An alternative framework for assessing the status and vitality of languages in danger was proposed by a UNESCO panel of experts in 2003 (Brenzinger *et al.* 2003). The UNESCO framework establishes six categories in a scale of language vitality. For the purpose of assessing the status of a language, the framework provides a set of 9 factors that can be analyzed to determine the category. The most salient of these factors is intergenerational transmission. See Table 2 for a list of the categories and their corresponding state of intergenerational transmission.

Table 2

UNESCO Framework (UNESCO 2009)

Degree of endangerment	**Intergenerational Language Transmission**
Safe	The language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted
Vulnerable	Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)
Definitely endangered	Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home
Severely endangered	The language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves
Critically endangered	The youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
Extinct	There are no speakers left

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

In contrast to Fishman's GIDS, the UNESCO framework provides a richer set of categories at the weaker end of the scale. Note, however, that it does not differentiate the status of languages which are above Level 6 on the GIDS scale and lumps them all together under the single label of "Safe". In spite of some significant obstacles to its ready implementation (See Lewis 2006), the UNESCO Framework is beginning to be used and reported on a broad scale in the latest edition of the *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* (UNESCO 2009).

ETHNOLOGUE LANGUAGE VITALITY CATEGORIES

The *Ethnologue* (Gordon 2005; Grimes 2000; Lewis 2009) categorizes language vitality in terms of a five level scale which is focused more on the number of first-language speakers than on other factors. See Table 3 for a list of the categories and their definitions. There are other data reported in Ethnologue which also contribute to a more well-rounded understanding of the status of each language, but those are not tied together in a single index. (For a discussion of a more robust set of metadata, see Lewis 2008.)

Table 3

Ethnologue Vitality Categories (Lewis 2009)

Category	**Description**
Living	Significant population of first-language speakers
Second Language Only	Used as second-language only. No first-language users, but may include emerging users
Nearly Extinct	Fewer than 50 speakers or a very small and decreasing fraction of an ethnic population
Dormant	No known remaining speakers, but a population links its ethnic identity to the language
Extinct	No remaining speakers and no population links its ethnic identity to the language

Like the UNESCO Framework, the Ethnologue fails to provide sufficient differentiation between languages at the higher end of the GIDS scale where standardization and the written use of language for education, work, and governance is a significant factor. There is a great deal of diversity of situations and levels of development to be found among the languages which Ethnologue identifies simply as "Living". The category is taken as a default and is left undefined.

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

Ethnologue has long used the category of Second Language Only for languages which are still in use but which are not learned by any community as their first language. Generally these have been liturgical languages and languages of special use (cants, jargons, some pidgins, and so forth). In the 16th edition, this category has been broadened to include languages which were at one point considered Extinct (or, now, Dormant; see below) but which are being revitalized and which have a growing group of emerging speakers who are learning their heritage language as a second language.

In the 16th edition of the Ethnologue, the notion of dormant languages was introduced. The need to distinguish between no-longer-spoken languages that still have a self-identifying ethnic population in contrast to no-longer-spoken languages that have no self-identifying ethnic population was indicated by the volume of editorial correspondence from members of ethnic groups who objected to the label of "extinct" even though no remaining first-language speakers could be identified. Following the trend in the literature to speak of "reawakening sleeping languages", the category Dormant (Leonard 2008) was added for the former while retaining Extinct for the latter.

These partial modifications and accommodations of the Ethnologue scheme to a changing understanding of language endangerment and revitalization have made it apparent that a more thoroughgoing and comprehensive categorical framework is needed in order to account for the broader range of factors and situations of the world's languages at all stages of disruption and development.

As a widely-used reference volume, it would be advantageous for the Ethnologue to report ethnolinguistic vitality using a framework that represents current best practice and that can be applied consistently to all of the world's languages whatever their degree of endangerment or development. At the same time, such a scale should maintain some continuity with the longstanding Ethnologue categories in order to maintain comparability and to facilitate longitudinal studies of endangerment.

AN EXPANDED GIDS (EGIDS)

With Fishman's GIDS retaining its foundational and seminal role in the discourse on language endangerment and with the highly influential and practical roles of the UNESCO atlas and the Ethnologue as comprehensive catalogs of the world language situation, a harmonization of the three schemes could be broadly useful and relevant for both analysts and practitioners.

An expanded version of the GIDS which incorporates such a harmonization is shown in Table 4. The table lists 13 levels. The numbering of those levels has been designed to maintain correspondence with Fishman's GIDS. Additional levels are either assigned new numbers or are delineated by the addition of a letter. Thus Levels 6a and 6b in the EGIDS together correspond to what is described more generally in Fishman's GIDS as Level 6. Similarly 8a plus 8b correspond to the original Level 8. Levels 0, 9, and 10 are entirely new descriptive categories that

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

allow the EGIDS to be applied to all languages of the world. In addition, for convenience, each numbered level is also assigned a short one or two word label that identifies the major functional category of that level. The table also identifies the corresponding UNESCO (Brenzinger *et al.* 2003) endangerment/vitality category for each EGIDS level. A brief description of each level follows.

Table 4

Expanded GIDS

Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (adapted from Fishman 1991)*			
LEVEL	**LABEL**	**DESCRIPTION**	**UNESCO**
0	International	The language is used internationally for a broad range of functions.	Safe
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level.	Safe
2	Regional	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services.	Safe
3	Trade	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders.	Safe
4	Educational	Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education.	Safe
5	Written	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.	Safe
6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.	Safe
6b	Threatened	The language is used orally by all generations but only some of the child-bearing generation are transmitting it to their children.	Vulnerable
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves but none are transmitting it to their children	Definitely Endangered
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.	Severely Endangered
8b	Nearly Extinct	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.	Critically Endangered
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.	Extinct
10	Extinct	No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.	Extinct

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

EGIDS Level 0 (International) − The relatively few languages that are clearly used internationally are at this level. While few if any minority languages will even aspire to this level of safety and use, it is included for completeness and to allow a categorization of all the languages of the world.
EGIDS Level 1 (National) − This level encompasses languages which function as national or official languages and have full oral and, more importantly perhaps, written use that is supported by the apparatus of the nation-state through standardization, use in government documents, compulsory national-level education, and official publishing and dissemination institutions.
EGIDS Level 2 (Regional) − This level encompasses languages which function similarly to national languages but at the more localized, regional level. They may not have as many resources available to them nor as much institutional support as a national language, but they are clearly recognized and promoted by regional institutions for education, government services and mass media.
EGIDS Level 3 (Trade) − This level encompasses languages that may not have official recognition but are "vehicular" in that they are used as a second language by members of multiple first-language communities and serve important functions for business and intergroup communication. They are learned outside of the home either formally or informally and often have a standardized (though perhaps not officially sanctioned) written form.
EGIDS Level 4 (Educational) − This level includes languages that are used either as media of instruction or as subjects of instruction in a system of institutionally-supported, widely-accessible education. It may be the first language of literacy for speakers of minority languages with eventual acquisition of and transition to one of the languages at a higher level on the EGIDS for more extensive written use. This is the stage that is often described as "mother tongue literacy" or "first language literacy". Institutional support for literacy acquisition may be primarily situated in the local community and be provided by more-or-less formally constituted local institutions that are sustainable. Lee and Mclaughlin (2001) make the distinction at this level between institutions which are primarily under local control (Level 4a) and those which are under the control of outsiders (Level 4b). That distinction may well be useful in many contexts. Here we focus primarily on the existence of institutional support for education in the minority language in contrast to introduced literacy without such institutional support (EGIDS Level 5).
EGIDS Level 5 (Written) − This is the level at which literacy is incipient, more-often-than-not informally transmitted and with only weak or transient institutional support. Although the introduction of literacy can serve powerfully to improve the prestige of a minority language and may increase its prospects for survival in many cases, the stronger institutional support for literacy acquisition and maintenance found at the levels above is required for ongoing transmission of local-language literacy from one generation to the next.

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

EGIDS Level 6a (Vigorous) − This is the level of ongoing oral use that constitutes sustainable orality. Intergenerational transmission of the language is intact and widespread in the community. The language use and transmission situation is stable or gaining strength.

EGIDS Level 6b (Threatened) − This is the level of oral use that is characterized by a downward trajectory. The distinction between the two kinds of GIDS Level 6 follows from the observation that Level 6 straddles the line of diglossia (King 2001). In our view, Level 6a represents a stable diglossic configuration where oral functions are assigned to the L language and written functions are assigned to H. In contrast, Level 6b represents the loss of that stable diglossic arrangement with the oral domains being overtaken by another language or languages. At Level 6b, many parents are transmitting the language to their children but a significant proportion are not, so that intergenerational transmission is partial and may be weakening. With each new generation there will be fewer speakers or fewer domains of use or both. There may only be barely discernible portents of language shift and few in the community may have any sense of impending danger. It is the first of the EGIDS levels that corresponds to an endangered category in the UNESCO framework.

EGIDS Level 7 (Shifting) − This is the level that identifies clear cases of language shift in progress. The fact that parents are not passing the language on to their children is clearly discernible because that has become the norm within the language community. Consequently the domains where use of the language is dominant are decreasing. Language revitalization through reestablishing home transmission would still be a possibility at this stage since the language was the first language for most of the parents.

EGIDS Level 8a (Moribund) − This is the case represented by Fishman's description of GIDS stage 8. Only the grandparent generation has any active and frequent speakers of the language, though some in the parent generation could speak it, though probably with less proficiency and with many examples of contact phenomena, if called upon to do so.

EGIDS Level 8b (Nearly Extinct) − This level encompasses the stereotypical language loss situation where the only remaining speakers are among the grandparent or great grandparent generation, and are so few or so scattered that they have little opportunity to use the language with each other.

EGIDS Level 9 (Dormant) − This level describes the situation which is increasingly common among languages that have gone out of use fairly recently. (Both Ethnologue and UNESCO use 1950 as a convenient threshold date.) In some cases revitalization efforts may be underway or at least contemplated. The community may have a strong (and perhaps increasing) sense of identification with their no-longer-spoken heritage language and wish to foster its use as a reinforcement of that identity. While the use of the language for daily communication will be minimal

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

(though there may be a number of emerging speakers who are gaining proficiency), the most common use will be ceremonial and symbolic, requiring the support of the community and home for intergenerational transmission.

EGIDS Level 10 (Extinct) − This level accounts for those situations where there are no remaining speakers and no motivation within the community to retain an association with the language, at least for the immediate future. As communities approach this stage it is important that they be encouraged and assisted in the documentation of linguistic and sociocultural practices which will be adequate to preserve the memory of the language for future generations. With such documentation, revitalization at least to the stage of recovering linguistic identity (EGIDS Level 9) might be achievable at some point in the future should the community so desire.

ASSESSMENT OF EGIDS LEVELS

The current status of a language can be assessed by answering a few key questions about community language use. Fig. 1 provides an overview of a decision-tree that can guide the diagnosis and evaluation process. The decision tree involves only five questions. For the two levels at the bottom of the scale, an answer to only the first question is sufficiently diagnostic. For the four levels at the top of the scale, the first two questions must be answered. For the remaining cases, only three questions must be answered to determine the EGIDS level. Answering these questions may well entail a good deal of research, but this process is quite focused and should make possible a much more comprehensive and rapid categorization of every language of the world. A brief description of each key question follows.

Key Question #1: What is the current identity function of the language? There are four possible answers to this question: Historical, Heritage, Home, and Vehicular.

- **Historical** − The language has no remaining speakers and no community which associates itself with the language as a language of identity. There are no remaining functions assigned to the language by any group. It is therefore at EGIDS Level 10 (Extinct).
- **Heritage** − There are no remaining L1 speakers, but there may be some emerging L2 speakers or the language may be used for symbolic and ceremonial purposes only. Therefore, the language is at EGIDS Level 9 (Dormant).
- **Home** − The language is used for daily oral communication in the home domain by at least some. Here the trajectory of language shift or retention becomes an important factor in order to determine the EGIDS level; see Key Question #3.

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

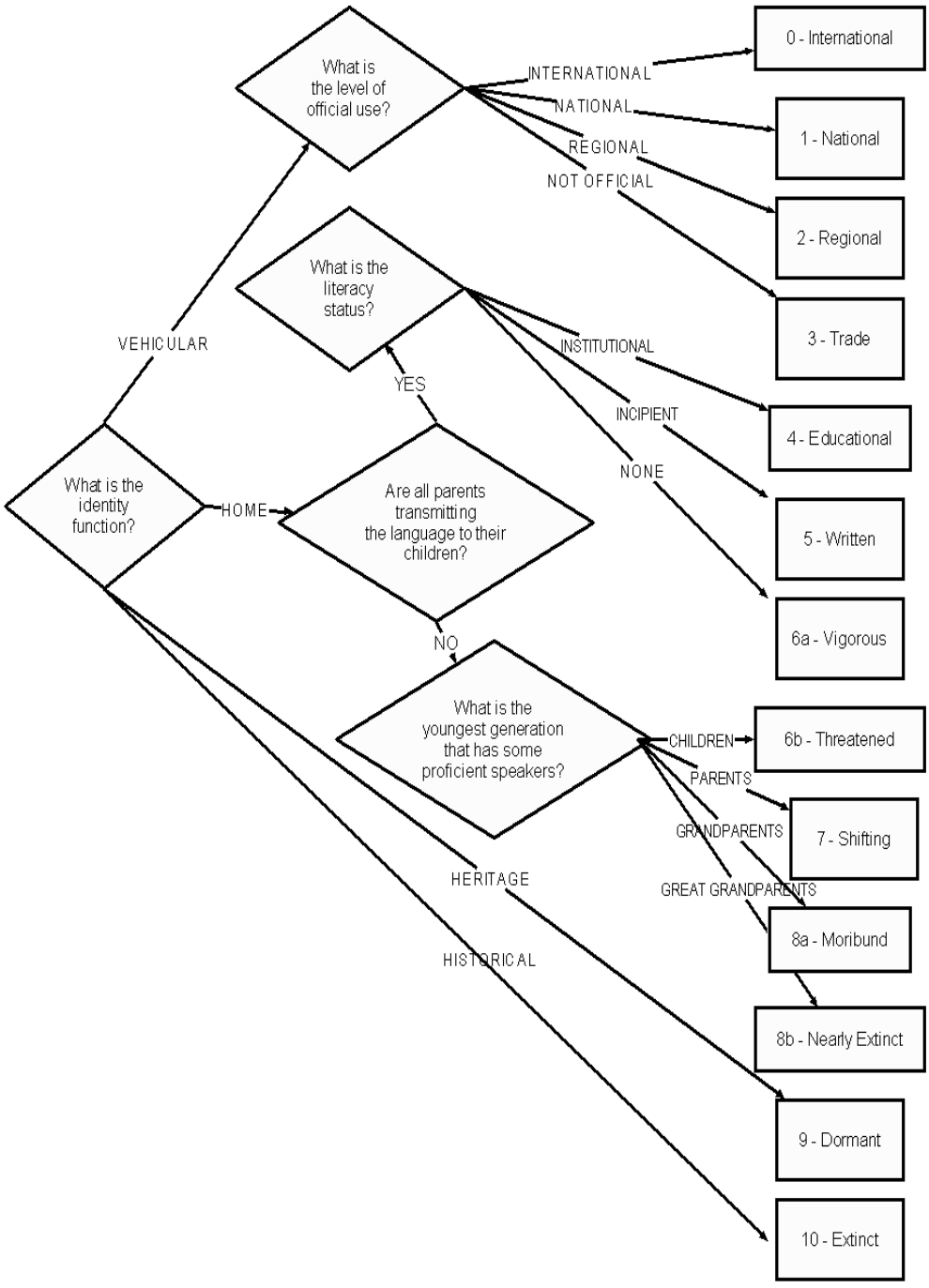


Fig. 1 – Extended GIDS Diagnostic Decision Tree.

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

- **Vehicular** − Based on the use of the phrase "vehicular language" by some as a synonym for lingua franca, we use the term vehicular to refer to the extent to which a language is used to facilitate communication among those who speak different first languages. If a language is characterized here as being Vehicular, it is used by others as an L2 in addition to being used by the community of L1 speakers. The language has an identity function that goes beyond the local community most closely associated with it. In some few cases (e.g. Korean, Japanese), an entire nation-state may, for the most part, share a single common identity and culture and so achieve vehicularity in that the language is widely used by nearly all. When this response is selected, Key Question #2 must be answered in order to determine the EGIDS level.

Key Question #2: What is the level of official use? This question helps to distinguish between the possible EGIDS levels when a language is serving the Vehicular identity function. There are four possible answers which correspond to EGIDS levels 0 through 3.

- **International** − The language is used internationally as a language of business, education, and other activities of wider communication. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 0 (International).
- **National** − The language has official or de facto recognition at the level of the nation-state and is used for government, educational, business, and for other communicative needs. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 1 (National).
- **Regional** − The language is officially recognized at the sub-national level for government, education, business, and other functions. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 2 (Regional).
- **Not Official** − The language is not officially recognized but is used beyond the local community for intergroup interactions. These may include business (trade), social or other communicative functions. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 3 (Trade).

Key Question #3: Are all parents transmitting the language to their children? This question must be asked when the answer to Key Question #1 is Home. There are two possible answers.

- **Yes** − Intergenerational transmission of the language is intact, widespread and ongoing. If this is the selected answer, one more question (Key Question #4) must be answered in order to determine if the community is at EGIDS Level 4, 5, or 6a.
- **No** − Intergenerational transmission of L1 is being disrupted. This response would characterize incipient or more advanced language shift. One additional question must be answered (Key Question #5) in order to determine if the community is at EGIDS Level 6b, 7, 8a, or 8b.

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

Key Question #4: What is the literacy status? If the response to Key Question #3 is "Yes", then the status of literacy education in the community needs to be identified. There are three possible answers to this question:

- **Institutional** − Literacy is acquired through a system of education supported by a sustainable institution. This is typically the government education system, though other community-based institutions (such as church or cultural organization) may provide literacy education. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 4 (Educational).
- **Incipient** − Literacy in the language has been introduced into the community but has not been acquired by most community members through well-established publicly-accessible institutions. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 5 (Written).
- **None** − There is no significant literate population, no organized means of acquiring literacy skills, or those who are literate read and write only in a second language. There are no institutions supporting local-language literacy or if such institutions exist they have not yet had a significant impact on the community. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 6a, Vigorous.

Key Question #5: What is the youngest generation of proficient speakers? When the response to Key Question #3 (Intergenerational Transmission) is "No", it is necessary to know how far along language shift has progressed in order to assess the current EGIDS level. The youngest generation of proficient speakers in an unbroken chain of intergenerational transmission provides an index to the progress of language shift. By "proficient speaker" we mean a person who uses the language for full social interaction in a variety of settings. Specifically excluded is the partial and passive ability that typically characterizes the first generation that embraced the second language.

- **Great Grandparents** − The youngest proficient speakers of the language are of the great grandparent generation. Language shift is very far along. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 8b (Nearly Extinct).
- **Grandparents** − The youngest proficient speakers of the language are of the grandparent generation. Language shift is advanced. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 8a (Moribund).
- **Parents** − The youngest proficient speakers of the language are the adults of child-bearing age. Language shift has begun and is clearly in progress. This corresponds to EGIDS Level 7 (Shifting).
- **Children** − The youngest proficient speakers of the language are children. However, language shift may be in its beginning stages since full intergenerational transmission is not in place (Key Question #3). This corresponds to EGIDS Level 6b (Threatened).

Using these five questions and the decision tree process diagrammed in Fig. 1, an assessment can be made that will arrive at a description of each language

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

community in terms of one of the EGIDS levels. What is more, the five key questions identify some of the major factors that need to be addressed in any language maintenance, revitalization, or development project. These factors are identity, vehicularity, the status of intergenerational transmission, literacy acquisition status, and a societal profile of generational language use. This evaluation provides a baseline from which language planners can begin to construct a plan of action for their efforts.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

All of the above assumes the downward trend of language shift.

Table 5 shows the relevant subset of the EGIDS when viewed from the perspective of language revitalization rather than language loss. A different set of labels and level descriptions are warranted for some of the levels at the lower end of the scale if the trend of language change is moving upwards either because of naturally occurring language spread or because of engineered language revitalization efforts. In addition to the change in the label for each level, the description of the level is also modified to reflect the upward trend of language use as the community moves from one less robust level of language vitality to a stronger one.

Table 5

Revitalization EGIDS Levels

6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned at home by all children as their first language.
6b	Re-established	Some members of a third generation of children are acquiring the language in the home with the result that an unbroken chain of intergenerational transmission has been re-established among all living generations.
7	Revitalized	A second generation of children are acquiring the language from their parents who also acquired the language in the home. Language transmission takes place in home and community.
8a	Reawakened	Children are acquiring the language in community and some home settings and are increasingly able to use the language orally for some day-to-day communicative needs.
8b	Reintroduced	Adults of the parent generation are reconstructing and reintroducing their language for everyday social interaction.
9	Rediscovered	Adults are rediscovering their language for symbolic and identificational purposes.

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

Most importantly, at the lowest end of the scale the natural pattern of intergenerational transmission (from elder to younger) is being re-established, as children are re-acquiring the heritage language as their first language and subsequently becoming the parents, grandparents and great grandparents of each succeeding generation of language users. When language shift is in progress, the extent of language loss is measured by identifying the youngest generation (in an unbroken chain of intergenerational transmission) that retains proficiency in the language as described by Table 4. By contrast, the advance of language re-acquisition and revitalization is measured by identifying the oldest generation (in an unbroken chain of intergenerational transmission) that can once again use the language with proficiency as described by Table 5. Vigorous oral use of the language is not achieved until all generations are once again using the language and transmitting it from elder to younger in the home setting. For these purposes, Key Question #5 is restated as "What is the OLDEST generation that has acquired L1 proficiency?" and the responses are inverted to indicate the corresponding re-labeled EGIDS levels from 6b to 8b.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The GIDS as developed by Fishman has served as the single most-often cited evaluative framework of language endangerment for nearly two decades. It has provided the theoretical underpinnings of much of what practitioners of language revitalization have engaged in. The UNESCO Framework and the Ethnologue vitality categories are also widely used and relied upon. We have proposed a harmonization of these three evaluative schemes that results in an expanded GIDS (EGIDS). We have also proposed that any language situation can be evaluated in terms of the EGIDS by answering five key questions regarding identity function, vehicularity, state of intergenerational language transmission, literacy acquisition status, and a societal profile of generational language use.

With this baseline information in hand, language planners can determine what it will take for a community to move from the current EGIDS level to a more desirable status on the scale. What is more, the answers to the key questions help identify which factors require particular attention in order for the desired outcomes to be achieved. Such a process simplifies and provides clarity to the planning process and helps direct scarce resources to the activities that are most likely to be productive and helpful over the longer term.

The model presented here is based on a thoughtful analysis of theory and general observations of language development programs worldwide. Nevertheless, it needs to be empirically tested and without doubt merits refinement and improvement. Comments, field observations, and practical application notes are invited. We end, as we began, by quoting Fishman:

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

> Thus, any theory and practice of assistance to threatened languages-whether the threat be a threat to their very lives, on the one hand, or a much less serious functional threat, on the other hand-must begin with a model of the functional diversification of languages. If analysts can appropriately identify the functions that are endangered as a result of the impact of stronger languages and cultures on weaker ones, then it may become easier to recommend which therapeutic steps must be undertaken in order to counteract any injurious impact that occurs. The purpose of our analyses must be to understand, limit and rectify the societal loss of functionality in the weaker language when two languages interact and compete for the same functions within the same ethnocultural community and to differentiate between life-threatening and non-life-threatening losses. (Fishman 2001)

We hope that the Expanded GIDS we have proposed will make a contribution toward this end.

REFERENCES

Brenzinger, M., A. Yamamoto, N. Aikawa, D. Koundiouba, A. Minasyan, A. Dwyer, C. Grinevald, M. Krauss, O. Miyaoka, O. Sakiyama, R. Smeets, O. Zepeda, 2003, *Language vitality and endangerment*, Paris, UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group Meeting on Endangered Languages, http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages.

Denison, N., 1977, "Language death or language suicide?", *International Journal of the Sociology of Language,* 12, 13−22.

Dorian, N. C., 1977, "The problem of the semi-speaker in language death", *Linguistics,* 191, 23−32.

Dorian, N. C., 1980, "Language shift in community and individual: the phenomenon of the laggard semi-speaker", *International Journal of the Sociology of Language,* 25, 85−94.

Dorian, N. C., 1981, *Language death: The life cycle of a Scottish Gaelic dialect,* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.

Dorian, N. C., 1987, "The value of language-maintenance efforts which are unlikely to succeed", *International Journal of the Sociology of Language,* 68, 57−67.

Dorian, N. C. (ed.), 1989, *Investigating obsolescence: Studies in language contraction and death*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Fishman, J. A., 1991, *Reversing language shift,* Clevedon, UK, Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Fishman, J. A. (ed.), 2001, *Can threatened languages be saved? Reversing language shift, revisited: A 21st century perspective*, Clevedon, UK, Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Gal, S., 1978, "Peasant men can't get wives: Language change and sex roles in a bilingual community", *Language in Society,* 7, 1−16.

Gordon, R. G. (ed.), 2005, *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*, 15th edition, Dallas, SIL International.

Grimes, B. F. (ed.), 2000, *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*, 14th edition, Dallas, SIL International.

King, K. A., 2001, *Language revitalization processes and prospects: Quichua in the Ecuadorian Andes,* Clevedon, UK, Multilingual Matters Press.

Krauss, M., 1992, "The world's languages in crisis", *Language,* 68, 4−10.

Lee, T. S., D. McLaughlin, 2001, "Reversing Navajo language shift, revisited", in: J. A. Fishman (ed.), *Can threatened languages be saved? Reversing language shift, revisited: A 21st century perspective,* Clevedon, UK, Multilingual Matters Ltd, 23−43.

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)

Leonard, W. Y., 2008, "When is an 'extinct language' not extinct? Miami, a formerly sleeping language", in: K. King, N. Schilling-Estes, L. Fogle, J. Lou, B. Soukup (eds.), *Sustaining linguistic diversity. Endangered and minority languages and language varieties*. Washington DC, Georgetown University Press, 23−34.

Lewis, M. P., 2006, *Towards a categorization of endangerment of the world's languages*, SIL International, http://www.sil.org/silewp/abstract.asp?ref=2006-002.

Lewis, M. P., 2008, "Evaluating endangerment: Proposed metadata and implementation", in: K. King, N. Schilling-Estes, L. Fogle, J. Lou, B. Soukup (eds.), *Sustaining linguistic diversity. Endangered and minority languages and language varieties* Washington, DC, Georgetown University Press, 35−49.

Lewis, M. P. (ed.), 2009, *Ethnologue: Languages of the world*, 16th edition, Dallas, SIL International, http://www.ethnologue.com.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T., 2000, *Linguistic genocide in education - or worldwide diversity and human rights?,* Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

UNESCO, 2009, *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, UNESCO, http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00139

BDD-A349 © 2010 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:54:08 UTC)