

Making EGIDS assessments for the *Ethnologue*

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In our 2010 article, “Assessing language endangerment: Extending Fishman’s GIDS” (http://www.lingv.ro/resources/scm_images/RRL-02-2010-Lewis.pdf), we introduce the Extended Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale. Response to the scale has been positive, both within SIL and without. We are thus planning to include an assessment of the EGIDS level for every language in the next edition of the *Ethnologue*.

In attempts thus far by a number of users to apply the decision tree in the article to the task of making EGIDS assessments, we have found that the decision tree does not always lead to the right answer. We are thus working on refining the definitions and the decision tree to better incorporate the insights of the Sustainable Use Model. In the meantime, however, we offer this “job aid” to assist in making the assessments. On the next page is a revision of the table of EGIDS levels in which definitions for some of the levels have been refined. These revisions are designed to address the kinds of questions we have been getting about deciding on unclear cases. In addition, the following subsections offer further commentary on each of the levels. If you still have a question about how to classify a given language after consulting the revised chart on the next page, try to resolve the problem by reading the commentary for the levels you are trying to decide between. If you still cannot decide how to classify the language, please let us know about the situation you are trying to classify.

0. International

For this level, we are taking the United Nations as the authority. There are six languages that are recognized as official for this body—Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish—and these are the languages we place in this category. Other languages used across a number of countries (like Portuguese) are classed as a national language in multiple countries.

1. National

The primary component of Level 1 status is that the written language is used to conduct the business of national government. This need not take the form of being declared “official” in law. A language that is used nationally for oral communication, but which is not used in writing the record the laws of the land or the decisions of the courts, is classed as Level 3.

2. Regional

As with Level 1, the key defining characteristics for this level is use in written form to conduct the business of government. At Level 2 the government in focus is not the national government, but the government of an officially recognized administrative subdivision of the country (for instance, a province or state).

Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (adapted from Fishman 1991)*

LEVEL	LABEL	DESCRIPTION	UNESCO
0	International	The language is widely used between nations in trade, knowledge exchange, and international policy.	Safe
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the nationwide level.	Safe
2	Regional	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government within officially recognized regions of a nation.	Safe
3	Trade	The language is used in work and mass media without official status to transcend language differences across a region.	Safe
4	Educational	The language is vigorous and literacy in the language is being transmitted sustainably through a system of public education.	Safe
5	Written	The language is vigorous and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community though literacy is not yet sustainable.	Safe
6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is normally learned by children as their first language.	Safe
6b	Threatened	The language is still used orally within all generations but there is a significant threat to sustainability, particularly a break in transmission to the next generation by a significant portion of the child-bearing generation.	Vulnerable
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation can use the language among themselves but they do not normally transmit 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 elderly and have little opportunity to use the language.	Critically Endangered
9	Dormant	There are no proficient speakers, but some symbolic use remains as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community.	Extinct
10	Extinct	No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.	Extinct

3. Trade

A Level 3 language lacks such recognition as a language for conducting the written business of government. It is still “vehicular”, however, and used by native speakers of other languages across a region for purposes of work or mass media. The general pattern in the EGIDS is that each level adds to what is true in the next lower level; this is the one point where an exception is possible. It is not a requirement of Level 3 that it also be used in formal education as in Level 4. The key component here is vehicularity (that is, being used widely by people who speak different first languages). The original logic of the GIDS as defined by Fishman is that successively higher levels are stronger and less susceptible to language shift. Clearly an unwritten trade language with millions of speakers is in a stronger position than a written local language with only thousands of speakers, even if the latter has achieved formal support in public education.

4. Educational

A Level 4 language is one that is vigorous and non-vehicular and that has achieved sustainable literacy. The fact of educational use of the written language is not enough to qualify as Level 4 (as was implied in the definition in the published paper). Rather, all five of the FAMED conditions as spelled out in the Sustainable Use Model should be in evidence:

- Adequate vernacular literature exists in the domains for which vernacular writing is desired.
- Vernacular literacy is being taught by trained teachers under the auspices of a sustainable institution.
- Members of the language community perceive the economic, social, religious, and identificational benefits of reading and writing in the local language.
- Official government policy calls for the cultivation of this language and cultural identity and the government has put this policy into practice by sanctioning an official orthography and using its educational institutions to transmit local language literacy.
- Members of the language community have a set of shared norms as to when to use the local language in writing versus when to use a more dominant language.

If there is a significant lack of any of these conditions such that removing the government support for education in the language would likely lead to the immediate disuse of literacy, then literacy should still be viewed as incipient and the language should be classified as Level 5.

5. Written

A Level 5 language is a vigorous language in which literacy is incipient. The mere fact that somebody has devised a writing system or even produced a piece of printed literature is not enough to lift a language from Level 6a to Level 5. Rather, the definition requires that some segment of the language community is effectively using literacy in the language. If this is true, but oral language use is significantly threatened, then the language should be classified as Level 6b. That is, if by ignoring the factor of literacy, it is clear that the language would be classified as

Level 6b rather than 6a, then the overall assessment should be 6b since the language cannot be considered vigorous.

6a. Vigorous

A Level 6a language is an oral language that is maintaining sustainable oral use among all generations in the home domain. The most salient indicator of this level is the fact that the language is being transmitted to all children in the home. By “all” children we do not mean literally 100%, but that it is the societal norm and it is typically followed. A few exceptional cases are not seen as a threat to sustainability, but when a significant number of exceptions emerge such that the community becomes aware that the norm is eroding, then there is a threat to sustainability and the language should be classified as Level 6b. While unbroken intergenerational transmission is the primary indicator of Level 6a, it is not sufficient by itself. Rather, all five of the FAMED conditions of the Sustainable Use Model should be in evidence:

- Adequate oral use exists in every domain for which oral use is desired.
- There is full oral transmission of the vernacular language to all children in the home.
- Members of the language community perceive the economic, social, religious, and identificational benefits of using their language orally.
- Official government policy affirms the oral use of the language.
- Members of the language community have a set of shared norms as to when to use the local language orally versus when to use a more dominant language.

If there is a significant lack of any of these five conditions, then sustained oral use is under threat and the language should be classified as Level 6b. For instance, if the community perceives so little value to using their local language that they would immediately begin transmitting the more dominant language if only they could learn it, then on-going language use is not sustainable and the language should be classified as Level 6b. Or, if the official government policy is hostile toward ethnolinguistic diversity and calls for the elimination or suppression of this language, then on-going language use is not sustainable and the language should be classified as Level 6b.

6b. Threatened

A Level 6b language is one that has started tipping away from sustainability. If an effort can be made to address any of the above conditions that are undermining the local language, then it may be possible to pull the language back toward sustainability; however, in the absence of such efforts, the community will be likely to continue shifting toward greater use of the more dominant language.

7. Shifting

A Level 7 language is teetering on the tipping point of sustainability. It is no longer the norm for parents to transmit the language to their children, but the parents still know the language, so it would be possible for intergenerational transmission to resume if the community could be convinced of the value of their language. Level 7 does not mean that transmission to children has completely stopped, but that it is now exceptional. Full transmission happens so infrequently

that children who are learning the language will have difficulty finding peers to speak the language with (including a spouse) when they are adults.

8a. Moribund

A Level 8a language is still in everyday use in some homes, but only among those who are beyond child-bearing age. Thus, the normal cycle of intergenerational transmission has been broken. There may be younger adults who know the language at least somewhat, but they do not regularly speak it with their peers and are not fully proficient.

8b. Nearly extinct

A Level 8b language is no longer used in any home. Those who can still speak the language no longer have a spouse who can speak the language and find little opportunity to use it since there are so few other speakers.

9. Dormant

A Level 9 language is no longer the first language of any living individual. However, it is still the recognized heritage language of an ethnic community and it still serves as a marker of ethnic identity. Some vestiges of the language remain and are passed on within the community to strengthen the heritage identity. This could include names of cultural object, local place names, traditional greetings, formulaic use of the language in traditional rituals, or even the continuing use of ancient scriptures within in a faith community.

10. Extinct

At this level the language is known only through the historical records. There is no living community that still looks to the language as a marker of its heritage identity.