



Discussion paper: an inventory of *best practices* and potential partners for exchanging information on minority languages

*Recommendations for Mercator's fact sheet system
on European minority languages*

by Johanneke Buning

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Background

The Mercator European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning aims to bring together minority language communities in Europe. The activities of the Mercator research centre include the organisation of workshops and seminars to exchange *best practices* in the fields of education and policy, the study of minority and regional languages, and the circulation of knowledge about minority language education via the *Regional Dossiers*. The centre is a part of the Fryske Akademy, located in Ljouwert, the capital of Fryslân, and a member of the *Mercator Network*, a network consisting of five centers spread across Europe.

Nowadays, a substantial part of knowledge circulation occurs online. Therefore, several years ago, Mercator built an online fact sheet system (a website with one information page for each European minority language) on which to share knowledge. This system was to complement the *Regional Dossiers*. The system still exists, but much of its content is outdated. Currently Mercator wishes to revive this system, and takes this opportunity to rethink its technical framework, focus and presentation of the information.

Mercator aims for the new system to:

- offer unique, up-to-date, and openly licensed information on minority languages in Europe;
- function as a platform for Mercator's network of experts on which to share their knowledge;
- cooperate with other online initiatives, and exchange knowledge;
- be affordable to set up and maintain;
- reach as many people as possible.

To find out what such a website could look like, this report investigates other initiatives currently online: what initiatives exist that concern themselves with minority languages, and use the internet to forward their cause? Which information do they share, and which activities have they set up? Do these initiatives cooperate, and if so, how?

This report aims to be of service not only to Mercator Research Centre, but to all who wish to contribute to the sharing of knowledge on minority and endangered languages of the world.

NOTE ABOUT THE TERM "MINORITY LANGUAGE"

There are several terms in use to describe a language that is somehow at a disadvantage: "minority language", "endangered language", "regional language", "lesser used language". Some minority languages are not endangered, and neither endangered or minority languages are necessarily regional. However, there is significant overlap between these terms. Initiatives that support minority languages often have similar motives and strategies as those that support endangered languages. Therefore, in this report, no further attention is given to the distinction between "regional", "minority", "endangered" and "lesser used" languages, and any initiative that supports one of these groups is discussed.

A list of online initiatives

Presented below is a list of online initiatives that support minority languages. Because the number of initiatives is so great, it is impossible to make this list complete. Therefore the list focusses, first of all, on other fact sheet systems, which might serve as best practices for Mercator's fact sheet system, on meta-search engines, that aim to bring together the countless online initiatives on minority languages, and finally on initiatives that reside in, or focus on Europe, the focus area of Mercator. If the reader finds the list to be incomplete, he or she is encouraged to contact us, so that the list might be extended.

FACT SHEET SYSTEMS

The initiatives listed below describe a set of characteristics of multiple languages, such as a language's vitality, or a language's linguistic properties, so that these aspects might be compared among languages.

- *Unesco's atlas of endangered languages*
<http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index.php>

What information does the website offer?

The website gives an overview of 2466 endangered languages in the world. For more details, see appendix 1.

When did the website start, who maintains its contents, and how is it funded?

The website was set up by Unesco. It complements the print edition of the *Atlas of Endangered Languages*, which started in 1996 (1st edition of the printed version). Main editor of both the print and the online edition is Christopher Moseley.

What is the website's purpose?

The Atlas "is intended to raise awareness about language endangerment and the need to safeguard the world's linguistic diversity among policy-makers, speaker communities and the general public, and to be a tool to monitor the status of endangered languages and the trends in linguistic diversity at the global level" (source: website).

Might one contribute? If so, how?

Yes, one can contribute online. These contributions are then reviewed by an editorial board and, if approved, placed on the fact sheet.

- *Ethnologue*
<http://www.ethnologue.com/>

What information does the website offer?

The *Ethnologue* gives an overview of 7102 endangered languages in the world. For more details, see appendix 1.

When did the website start, who maintains its contents, and how is it funded?

The website began in 1997, and complemented the print edition of the *Ethnologue* (which started in 1951). "The updated data in the last edition reflect the cooperation over the last year from many researchers in the field in SIL, and other organizations but also those who participated by reviewing, correcting, and updating data or by submitting online feedback" (source: *Ethnologue* website). Gary F. Simons is Executive Editor.

What is the website's purpose?

"The information in the *Ethnologue* will be valuable to anyone with an interest in cross-cultural communication, bilingualism, literacy rates, language planning and language policy, language development, language relationships, endangered languages, writing systems and to all with a general curiosity about languages". The *Ethnologue* was founded by Richard S. Pittman, who wished to share information on Bible translation needs around the world with his colleagues as well as with other language researchers (source: website).

Might one contribute? If so, how?

Yes, one can contribute online. Contributions become immediately visible on a comments page on the website. Once approved by the editor, they are included in the main text of the following edition of the *Ethnologue*.

- *Endangered languages*

<http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/>

What information does the website offer?

Endangered languages gives an overview of 3242 endangered languages in the world. For more details, see appendix 1.

When did the website start, who maintains its contents, and how is it funded?

The website was set up and funded by *Google*. The information on it comes from the *Catalogue of Endangered Languages (ELCat)*, which is under the direction of Lyle Campbell (University of Hawaii M noa) and Verónica Grondona (Eastern Michigan University). A team of regional specialists reaching out to knowledgeable individuals and organizations complement *ELCat's* information. Funding of the maintenance of the *ELCat* system ran until 2016;

What is the website's purpose?

"This catalogue informs users about the plight of endangered languages and encourages efforts to slow the loss. It provides information on the endangered languages of the world as a resource for the public, scholars, those whose languages are in peril, and funding agencies able to deploy limited resources".

Might one contribute? If so, how?

Yes, online via a comment's form. These contributions are published as comments on the bottom of the fact sheet. Also via emailing. All contributions are reviewed by the editor and, if approved, included in the fact sheet.

- *Eurominority*

<http://www.eurominority.eu/>

What information does the website offer?

Eurominority gives an overview on European minority languages and focusses on aspects of identity, for more details, see appendix 1.

When did the website start, who maintains its contents, and how is it funded?

The website started in 1999. It offers little information about its origins and maintenance. It has a web shop, and may be (partially) funded by product sales. The information is collected by a large network of correspondents in Europe.

What is the website's purpose?

The website does not state a purpose.

Might one contribute? If so, how?

Unclear, it's not possible to contribute online.

- *Wikipedia's list of endangered languages*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_endangered_languages

What information does the website offer?

The list is on a *Wikipedia* page. It consists of languages that are marked endangered by Unesco, or that are mentioned as endangered in some other written publication. *Wikipedia's* information about many of the listed languages is extensive. Different aspects are discussed: history, language vitality, and linguistics. For more information, see appendix 1.

When did the website start, who maintains its contents, and how is it funded?

It's unclear when the list started. The first comment about the list was from 2004.

What is the website's purpose?

Wikimedia, the organization that set up *Wikipedia*, mentions the following goal in its *Wikimedia* indigenous languages project: to document the sum of all knowledge in people's own language, and to share all knowledge of those languages themselves (source: *Wikimedia* meta-wiki website).

Might one contribute? If so, how?

Yes, everyone may contribute to *Wikipedia*. Contributions are immediately effective on the website. Though this "open nature" of *Wikipedia* makes it relatively easy to place faulty information on the website, there are several safety catches in place to make sure such information is removed fairly quickly.

- *WALS*

<http://wals.info/languoid>

What information does the website offer?

"*The World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS)* is a large database of structural (phonological, grammatical, lexical) properties of 2679 languages gathered from descriptive materials (such as reference grammars)". For more information, see appendix 1.

When did the website start, who maintains its contents, and how is it funded?

The first version was published as a book with CD-ROM in 2005 by *Oxford University Press*. The first online version was published in April 2008. The website is funded by the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. Information is collected by a team of 55 authors.

What is the website's purpose?

Not mentioned.

Might one contribute? If so, how?

Contributions don't seem possible.

META-SEARCH ENGINES

The initiatives listed below aim to reduce fragmentation of information about minority languages by collecting information resources, such as references to archive entries and links to websites.

- *Common LAnguage Resources and Technology INfrastructure (CLARIN)*
<http://www.clarin.eu/>

What information does the website offer?

The *CLARIN* website offers a search engine, called the *Virtual Language Observatory*, that provides access to language data all over the world. This data can take any form: website, multimedia, or written text. *CLARIN* also allows one to view these resources via *Google Earth*. In addition, the website provides tools to analyze language data. To enable the *CLARIN* search engine to discover a specific resource, this resource must first be tagged with a set of labels, a so-called metadata scheme. There are many kinds of metadata schemes, because there are many kinds of resources (e.g. word lists, audio materials, questionnaires). To ensure that *CLARIN* can handle all schemes, the *CLARIN* team developed a new meta-data scheme that can “hold” all others, called CMDI.

When did the website start, who maintains its contents, and how is it funded?

CLARIN is a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC). An ERIC is European organization that provides a European wide research infrastructure to overcome fragmentation of information. *CLARIN* has members all over Europe, but founding members are the Netherlands, Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Bulgaria, Poland, and the Dutch Language Union. Its headquarters is hosted by Utrecht University the Netherlands. *CLARIN* is funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme.

What are CLARIN’s goals?

To create a sustainable infrastructure that will provide the Humanities and Social Sciences with easy and permanent access to existing and future language resources and state-of-the-art tools (source: *CLARIN* information leaflet, march 2010).

Might one contribute? If so, how?

CLARIN suggests research centers where one might deposit language data, which in turn is indexed by *CLARIN*.

OLAC

<http://www.language-archives.org/>

What information does the website offer?

OLAC is a meta-search engine that searches archives on minority languages around the world. It lists many kinds of resources (including websites, audio and video materials, and documentation). *OLAC* can only discover resources tagged with the *OLAC* metadata scheme.

When did the website start, who maintains its contents, and how is it funded?

OLAC was initiated in 2000. It’s unclear whether the project is ongoing. The last news update was in 2010. Coordinators are Steven Bird (university of Melbourne, university of Pennsylvania), and Ethnologue’s Gary Simons (SIL).

A LIST OF ONLINE INITIATIVES

What is the website's purpose?

To disclose resources on (minority) languages that reside in archives all over the world. The project team also developed the *OLAC* metadata standard for the digital archiving of language resources.

Might one contribute? If so, how?

Yes, one may submit an archive to *OLAC*. Once tagged with metadata according to *OLAC*'s guidelines, the archive contents are indexed by the *OLAC* search engine.

- *Glottolog*

<http://glottolog.org/glottolog/language>

What information does the website offer?

Glottolog lists publications on linguistics of 7938 languages (especially minority languages), and linguistic classifications of languages. *Glottolog* has developed a code system, in which all known "languoids" (families, languages, dialects) are identified by a glottocode, consisting of four letters and four digits [abcd1234].

When did the website start, who maintains its contents, and how is it funded?

Glottolog is funded by the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History. It's unclear when the project started. The site is maintained by a small team, including Harald Hammarström, who set up the project.

What is the website's purpose?

The website aims to disclose publications on linguistics that reside in archives all over the world.

Might one contribute? If so, how?

By contacting *Glottolog* via email, one may submit additional bibliographies.

A LIST OF INITIATIVES THAT FOCUS ON OR RESIDE IN EUROPE

Archives

- *Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)*
Audio, video recordings, and documents from endangered languages. The archive was set up by the the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project.
- *Nederlandse dialectenbank*: <https://www.meertens.knaw.nl/ndb/#over>
Audio recordings of the Dutch language;
- *The Language Archive (TLA)*: <https://tla.mpi.nl/>
Audio and video recordings, some documents from endangered languages. The archive was originally set up by the Dobes research programme. The archive still exists, but is no longer being funded.

Programmes and institutes for the documentation of endangered languages

- *Dobes research programme*: <http://dobes.mpi.nl/>
Aimed to document endangered languages, funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung: 2000-2011; set up The Language Archive.
- *Documenting Endangered Languages Programme*: http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=12816
Offers funding for documentation programmes.

A LIST OF ONLINE INITIATIVES

- *Endangered Language Alliance*: <http://elalliance.org/>
Aims to document linguistic diversity of urban areas. Based in New York City. 2012 - Ongoing.
- *Foundation for Endangered Languages*: <http://www.ogmios.org/index.php>
Aims to support the documentation, protection and promotion of endangered languages.
- *Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project*: <http://www.hrelp.org/>
Aims to document endangered languages on the verge of extinction, including a few in Europe. Hosted by the University of London, 2002 - Ongoing. Set up the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR).
- *Interdisciplinary Centre for social and Language Documentation (CIDLeS)*: <http://www.cidles.eu/>
Located in Portugal, aims to document and promote the linguistic diversity in Europe.
- *Living Tongues institute*: <http://livingtongues.org/>
Aims to document endangered languages around the world.
- *SIL institute*: <http://www.sil.org/about>
"Serves language communities worldwide through research, translation, training and materials development" (source: website). SIL also publishes the Ethnologue, and is the registration authority for the ISO 639-3 language codes.
- *Sorosoro programme*: <http://www.sorosoro.org/en/in-the-medias/>
Aims to document endangered languages.

Initiatives that support minority and / or endangered languages

- *Arctic Languages Vitality Project*: <http://arcticlanguages.com/>
Aims to assess and promote Arctic indigenous languages. Funded by the Government of Canada, set up by six Arctic indigenous peoples organizations. 2013 - Ongoing.
- *Eurolinc*: <http://eurolinc.eu/>
Supports multilingualism on the internet.
- *European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe*: <http://www.ecml.at/>
Aims to encourage excellence and innovation in language teaching.
- *Federal union of European nationalities (FUEN)*: <https://www.fuen.org/>
An umbrella organization that supports minorities at a European level.
- *Kulturstiftung Sibirien*: http://www.kulturstiftung-sibirien.de/index_E.html
Aims to preserve the indigenous languages of the north of Russia, along with the traditional knowledge expressed in them; and the preservation and further enhancement of art and craft traditions.
- *Language Diversity*: <http://language-diversity.eu/en/>
Aims to raise awareness for multilingualism and cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe. Funded with support from the European Commission in 2012-2013.
- *Maaya*: <http://www.maaya.org>
Aims to serve as a platform for sharing knowledge on linguistic diversity.
- *Mercator Network*: <http://www.mercator-network.eu/>
Aims to connect multilingual communities across Europe, to exchange knowledge and best practices.
- *Network to promote linguistic diversity (NPLD)*: <http://www.npld.eu/>
Aims to create awareness for European minority languages and to promote their cause. Funded by the Lifelong Learning programme until the end of 2015.
- *Youth of European Nationalities (YEN)*: <http://www.yeni.org/>

a network of youth organizations working for the development of minority rights.

Endangered languages and technology

- *An Crúbadán* - Corpus Building for Minority Languages: <http://crubadan.org/>
Project that aims to use the vast quantities of text on the web for the development of NLP to the benefit of endangered languages.
- *Meta-Net*: <http://www.meta-net.eu/>
Scientific network that aims to facilitate multilingualism in Europe through technology.
- *Ethnos Project*: <http://www.ethnosproject.org/about/>.
Aims "to explore the intersection of indigeneity and information and communication technologies (ICTs)" (source: website).

Recommendations for Mercator's fact sheet system

FOCUS OF THE INFORMATION

The fact sheet systems that are currently online focus on: language vitality (*Endangered Languages*, *Ethnologue*, Unesco), language identity (*Eurominority*), and linguistic structure (*WALS*). Mercator's fact sheet system could focus on education of minority languages. Currently there is little information online about this topic, while Mercator has much knowledge to share: the *Regional Dossiers* also focus on education of minority languages. Good education contributes to language vitality: it is a factor in both Unesco's vitality index, and *Ethnologue's* language status. Knowing about the problems that a language faces educational-wise helps to structure actions, such as developing new educational materials, training teachers, or changing school curricula.

WHICH KINDS OF INFORMATION

All fact sheet systems offer facts. These take the form of numbers, short, concise text, scores, visualizations, or maps. Unesco's *Atlas*, *Endangered Languages*, and *Ethnologue* also provide a score for language vitality. Other kinds of information, sometimes provided, are:

- links to online resources;
- multimedia;
- bibliographical references;
- the names of contributors.

Mercator's *Regional Dossier's* also offer information about institutions that set up projects to benefit the language.

It is common practice to keep online texts short and concise, because reading from a screen is tiring. The text on Mercator's fact sheets should therefore be compact or represented by visualizations. Just like the *Regional Dossiers*, the fact sheets could name institutions that are important to a language. They might also list projects that deal with documenting the language or with raising language prestige. This would show the reader which aspects of a language currently receive attention. Mercator could consider constructing and presenting online an "Education Score" for a language, as a visualized summary on how a language is doing educational-wise.

HOW MIGHT MERCATOR EXCHANGE INFORMATION WITH OTHER SYSTEMS?

Most websites mainly exchange information via weblinks. E.g. *Ethnologue*, and *Endangered Languages* provide a link to *OLAC* on their website, *WALS* links to *Glottolog*. *Wikipedia's list of endangered languages* also mentions for each language Unesco's vitality index. Another exception is *OLAC*: one can submit a website about a specific language to *OLAC*. *OLAC* then lists this website if one searches information about this language. *Ethnologue*, and *Endangered Languages* are both indexed by *OLAC*.

Another option to exchange information would be to connect databases. For instance, Mercator might put her information in a database, and connect it to *EICat* (the database that feeds the *Endangered Languages* website). The two systems could then exchange information. None of the fact sheets do this however. The reason might be that connecting two databases is technically complex.

Mercator's fact sheets might list Unesco's, *Ethnologue's* and *Endangered Languages'* vitality scores. If Mercator were to create an "Education Score", this score could be listed on other websites.

Mercator's fact sheet system could be submitted to OLAC for indexing.

To let others know in what way Mercator's information might be used, the website should be clear about the copyright license attached to it.

INCORPORATING THE REGIONAL DOSSIERS

The fact sheet system is intended to complement the *Regional Dossiers*. This structure is similar to Unesco's interactive atlas, which complements the Atlas in print, and the online *Ethnologue* which used to complement the print edition. Nowadays, the online *Ethnologue* is at least as important as the print edition. For each language, written, more extensive dossiers may be ordered online.

How might Mercator incorporate its *Regional Dossiers* into its fact sheet system? One option is to place the entire dossier online. Specific topics on a language's fact sheet might contain the button: "read more". If this button is clicked, the visitor is taken to a specific paragraph of the regional dossier. An advantage of this is that the *Regional Dossiers* are more easily updated. A drawback is that the dossiers are meant to be read in print: their information is extensive, while it is often advised that online texts are short and concise. The online version should therefore be easily printable.

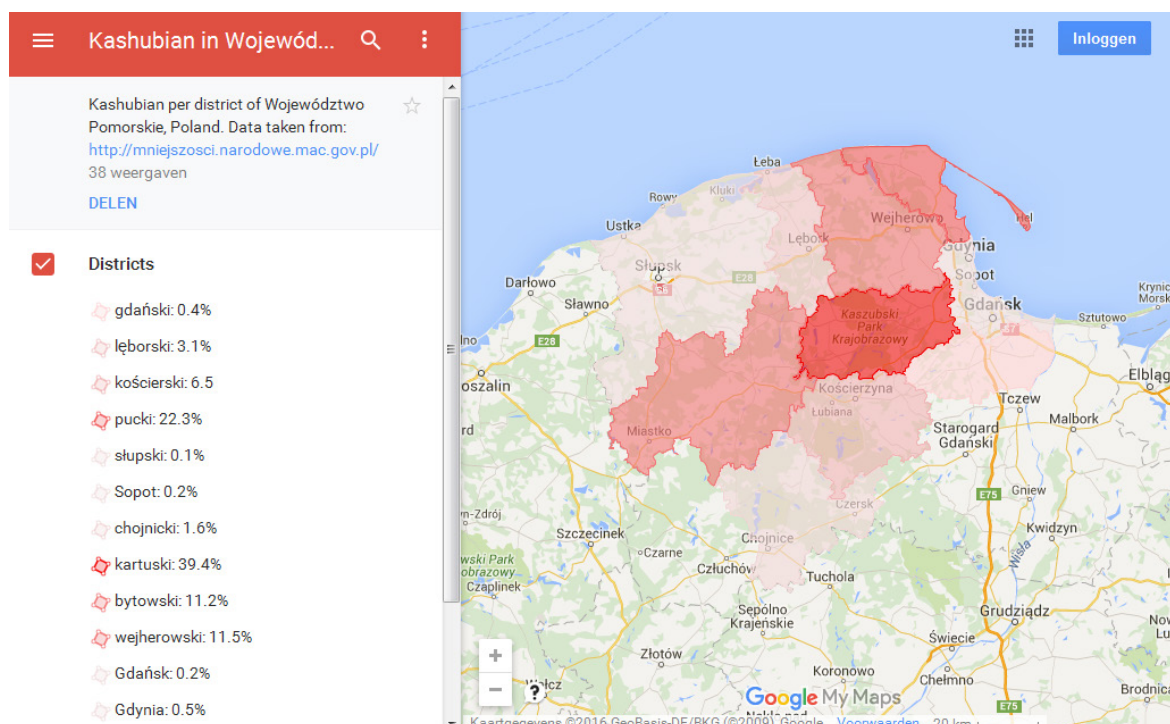
Another option would be to, just like *Ethnologue*, place a download link to the pdf of a dossier on a language's fact sheet.

NAVIGATION USING A MAP

All fact sheets systems navigate using a map. This works pretty well. Often *Google Maps* is used (e.g. by *Endangered Languages*, Unesco's atlas). In these cases minority languages are represented on the map with a pin on a specific set of coordinates.

It seem a good choice for Mercator's fact sheet system to also use Google Maps. Google Maps covers the whole world and is continuously updated. It is also free. A pin on a specific set of coordinates indicates where a minority language resides, but more precise means are available nowadays. For instance one might place an overlay on the maps that gives information about speaker numbers in different area's (see figure 1).

Figure 1: speaker numbers per province in Województwo, Poland (kindly provided by Jacek Pawlowski).



MAINTENANCE OF THE FACT SHEETS CONTENT AND TECHNICAL FRAMEWORK

All fact sheet systems online make use of dozens of authors to maintain the system, including *Eurominority*, which covers only European languages. Obviously, keeping a fact sheet system up-to-date is no small task. Most fact sheet systems have specific authors for specific regions, and a main editor, that monitors the system as a whole.

Some of the fact sheet systems allow contributions from the visitors. Sometimes this contribution becomes immediately visible online, in the form of a comment (*Endangered Languages*, or *Ethnologue*). On *Wikipedia* visitors are even allowed to modify the text itself.

Mercator also has a network of experts that could help maintain the fact sheets. For the fact sheet system a technical framework could be used that facilitates contributions from multiple authors, such as a wiki, the same type of framework that is used by *Wikipedia*. Because Mercator would want to regulate the sources of the information provided, this wiki should not be editable by everyone, but have a specified set of authors, whose editing rights are described in detail, so that specific authors are limited to editing specific fact sheets. Of course, visitors might also have valuable information, and it seems a good idea to allow them to contribute. For instance in the form of comments at the bottom of a fact sheet.

TECHNICAL MAINTENANCE

Little is mentioned on the various fact sheets about technical maintenance. *Endangered Languages* mentions that technical maintenance is done by a team at Michigan University. Their website was developed and designed by two ICT firms. A site needs technical maintenance to remain compatible with online innovations, and to avoid being hacked.

Mercator might make use of a content management system, such as *Typo3* (which it currently uses for its website), or a wiki such as *Dokuwiki*. Such systems are often continuously under development, and easily updated.

Concluding thoughts

With a fact sheet system about education, Mercator hopes to make an important contribution to the sharing online of knowledge about minority languages in Europe. In this effort to share information, Mercator offers to join hands with as many other initiatives as possible. By referring to each other online, via hyperlinks and by exchanging information, websites are more easily discovered, and knowledge about minority languages becomes less fragmented. Initiatives like CLARIN and OLAC are already doing a great job in this regard, by offering links and references in one place. In the future Mercator hopes to be part of an even more extensive cooperation: to develop a common standard for describing all different aspects of minority languages and language diversity, and to use this standard to create an online Atlas of Languages of the World, filled with all our shared knowledge.

Contact information

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Appendix 1: subjects covered by the various fact sheet systems

	Unesco's atlas	Endangered languages	Ethnologue
number of languages	2466	3242	7102
flag			
native to which country			
ISO code	x	x	x
glottocode			
original language name	x		
alternative name(s)	x	x	x
languages used in the community		x	x
religion			
involved in conflicts?			
political parties			
comments on language context		x	
vitality scores	x (language vitality)	x ("LEI")	x (Egids)
comments on vitality		x	x
intergenerational language transmission		x	
attitude towards language		x	
INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT	institutional support		
	government policies		
	official status		x
	government support		x
	institutions committed to language		x

APPENDIX 1

Eurominority	Wikipedia's list	Glottolog	WALS
?	?	7938	2679
x			
	x		
	x	x	x
	x	x	x
x		x	
x			
x			
x			
x			
	x (mainly based on Unesco)		
x			
	x		

APPENDIX 1

	Unesco's atlas	Endangered languages	Ethnologue
DEMOGRAPHICS	native speakers, number		
	first language speakers, number		
	absolute number of speakers	x	x
	comments on speaker numbers		x
	ethnic group size, number		x
	speaker migration patterns		x
	speaker numbers over time		x
	proportion of speakers within the total population		x
	semi-speakers, number		x
	domains in which the language is used		x
LOCATION DATA	map		x
	historic map		
	coördinates	x	x
	continent		
	country, region, province	x	
	location / places where the language is spoken	x	x
	comments on language location		x
	important places / capital		

APPENDIX 1

Eurominority	Wikipedia's list	Glottolog	WALS
	x		
x			
	x		
	x	x	x
x			
		x	
		x	
x	x	x	
x			

APPENDIX 1

	Unesco's atlas	Endangered languages	Ethnologue	
LINGUISTICS	phonology			
	lexical			
	word order			
	grammar			
	verbal categories			
	nominal categories			
	morphology			
	nominal syntax			
	complex sentences			
	Dialects		x	x
	child-dialects			
	linguistic classification		x	x
	writing script		x	x
	typology			x
	orthography		x	
	bibliography	x	x	
	links to online resources	x	only OLAC	only OLAC
	language projects	x		
	comments and discussion		x	
	references to information sources used	x	x	
name of contributor	x			

APPENDIX 1

Eurominority	Wikipedia's list	Glottolog	WALS
	x		x
			x
			x
	x		x
			x
			x
			x
			x
			x
	x		
		x	
	x	x	
	x		
	x	x	x
	x	x	

