



The 7,6 billion people of the world speak nearly [7000](#) different mother languages. Out of these languages only about one hundred have legal status as an official language of a state. Moreover, only about [5%](#) of the world's languages have more than one million native speakers.

In light of these figures, the situation of the official languages of European states is very different from that of most languages around the globe.

Firstly, most Europeans speak a mother tongue that is also an official language of their state. This means that most Europeans are able to study, work and engage in political life using only their native tongue – by no means a given for much of the world's population.

Secondly, nearly all official languages in Europe have more than one million speakers – and even those that don't still rank relatively high compared to the vast majority of languages. For

example, Icelandic, with its 400 000 native speakers outranks at least 60 % of the world's languages that have less than [100 000](#) speakers.

In addition to official languages, European countries are also home to speakers of several minority languages. Many of these, like Basque, Welsh, and the Sami languages have some kind of official status as regional or minority languages.

In order to promote and honor the importance of mother language and linguistic diversity everywhere in the world the United Nations marks International Mother Language Day on February 21st.

All in all, there are 287 languages spoken in Europe that are native to the region – a surprisingly small number compared to 2 144 living languages having their origins in Africa and 2 294 in Asia. Indeed, globally multilingualism is closer to a rule than an exception: a significant number of the world's population speaks more than one language.

On the other hand, Europe is home to some of the biggest and most widely spoken languages in the world, such as English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. Living side by side with these linguistic giants, speakers of smaller European languages sometimes voice concerns over the ubiquity of these world languages. Especially English, the dominant language of science and popular culture, is at times seen as a source of intrusive, new loan words that threatens to take over smaller, local languages.

All in all, this fear is largely unfounded. The vibrant European national languages are used as languages of education, government, culture and private life. Foreign loanwords alone do not threaten the survival of a language: on the contrary, change is an indicator of a healthy and vibrant language – only extinct languages can remain completely unchanged.

While official European languages are flourishing, globally the number of languages is constantly declining – and it is doing so at a worrying pace. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO](#) estimates that more than 3 500 of the world's 7 000 languages are at risk of going extinct within a few generations. Many of these languages have no more than [1 000](#) speakers.

A language becomes extinct when it is no longer passed on to the next generation of speakers: children don't learn the language from their parents and the only proficient speakers are the elderly.

The reasons behind language extinction are complex and manifold. For instance, a language may enjoy little social prestige, its speakers may face discrimination, or work and study opportunities may require fluent command of another, more widely used or prestigious language. All of this gradually leads to the narrowing down of contexts in which the language can be used, thus threatening its survival.

When a language dies out, part of the world's tapestry of cultural heritage fades out with it. Each language has its own peculiarities and characteristics through which it conveys meanings and connects its speakers to a wider society and a cultural community. Languages are not merely sounds, words and grammatical rules – mother language is part of our identity, heritage and worldview, and as such it is invaluable.