



Supporting minoritised and endangered languages

A policy brief based on the results from the CREWS and RISE UP projects

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Executive Summary

This brief focuses on threats to minoritised and endangered languages, and recommends policies and best practices to support and increase their chances of survival. This places value on diversity, and on minoritised groups who are all too often disadvantaged with respect to their own cultural and linguistic heritage. The need to communicate effectively with minority communities is all the more urgent today, as shown in their role in wellbeing (especially important in the recent Covid-19 pandemic) and local ecological knowledge.



1. Minoritised and endangered languages

1.1 New ways of making a difference

It is predicted that 50-90% of the world's languages will be seriously endangered or extinct by the year 2100 (with more than 4,000 currently listed as threatened to nearly extinct by Glottolog), while some 85-90% of the world's distinctive writing traditions are thought to be under threat. UNESCO further estimates that 40% of the world's population cannot access education in a language that they speak or understand. Meanwhile, many speakers turn away from indigenous or heritage languages because they are not associated with the privileges of nearby dominant, often colonial or politically empowered, majority languages. Writing is seen as an important factor in the sustainability of endangered languages, since written language offers opportunities to develop educational materials and to promote the language in other ways - while unwritten languages face considerable disadvantage and vulnerability (see e.g. [Digital survival of lesser-used languages](#)).

Recent pioneering research has the power to bring new perspectives to bear on the problems of language maintenance and revitalisation. These approaches aim to redress long-term problems that have hampered maintenance efforts, such as local apathy to heritage languages, difficulties in developing accepted orthographic systems and a lack of attention to the causative factors involved in the loss of language and writing.

The RISE UP project shifts the focus to language communities and their relationships, aiming to support the communities to reclaim these languages, e.g. by connecting key actors with each other (including younger community members), and fostering self confidence among existing speakers and new speakers of heritage languages alike. The approaches to this problem are necessarily multi-disciplinary and involve developing a new tool set for the use of the communities, while identifying good practice on all sides.

The CREWS project brings a unique angle of research by studying long-term trajectories of historical writing systems, and the languages they were used to write. This gives an unprecedented opportunity to observe how a given writing tradition changed over time, and to study the causative factors behind the loss of writing systems - a factor usually overlooked in research on modern languages. CREWS research offers new observations on the vitality of writing traditions, including specific recommendations as to how language maintenance efforts can be improved and made more effective. This research is now being continued through a follow-on project, VIEWS.



1.2 The difficulties of language maintenance and revitalisation

There are many languages in danger of being lost, where numbers of speakers are becoming smaller over time. A typical pattern is for surviving fluent speakers to be older members of the community, while younger people have much less exposure and are often deliberately educated in other, majority languages. Every language and speaker community is different, and faces many issues beyond this frequently identified low intergenerational transmission. Particular problems are encountered when attempting to maintain or revitalise a language.

- ✔ Minoritised languages tend to fall through the ‘cracks’ as it is difficult to intervene on an international level (e.g. through EU legislation) but national and regional support is often lacking.
- ✔ International acts on the protection and basic rights of (linguistic) minorities do not have universal backing (e.g. EU legislation unsigned by some EU member countries).
- ✔ Minoritised language communities can be difficult to reach, especially where they are diverse.
- ✔ Many minoritised languages remain unwritten and so largely “invisible”, and their speaker communities lack opportunities and resources to be educated in their own language.
- ✔ Intervention, language activism and the creation of learning materials all require funding.
- ✔ Indigenous, traditional minorities may clash with more recent migrants who have a similar struggle when it comes to the potential loss of languages and resources to support them.



Figure 1 - Discussion about the areas where Aranese is being spoken at the Institut d'Estudis Aranesi in Val d'Aran (Catalonia), during a visit of the RISE UP consortium to get more insight to current situation of this language community

1.3 Examples

Aromanian

Aromanian (Armăneashti / Rrămăneshti) or Vlach is a language variety that has evolved in the Balkans. It is spoken in localised areas and the capital cities of modern-day Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Romania, as well as in communities around the world. This Latinic language variety belongs to the Eastern Romance branch and has approx. 80,000 - 100,000 speakers overall. It is only recognised as a language in Albania and North Macedonia and there are several proposed writing standards. The various writing systems used are Latin, Cyrillic and Greek.

Various initiatives to strengthen the language are in place, including an analysis of language policies and ecologies, collaboration with the local communities, networking events (e.g. [RISE UP online networking event on digital tools](#)) on various levels, and an online platform to learn the language (Anveatsă Armăneashti).

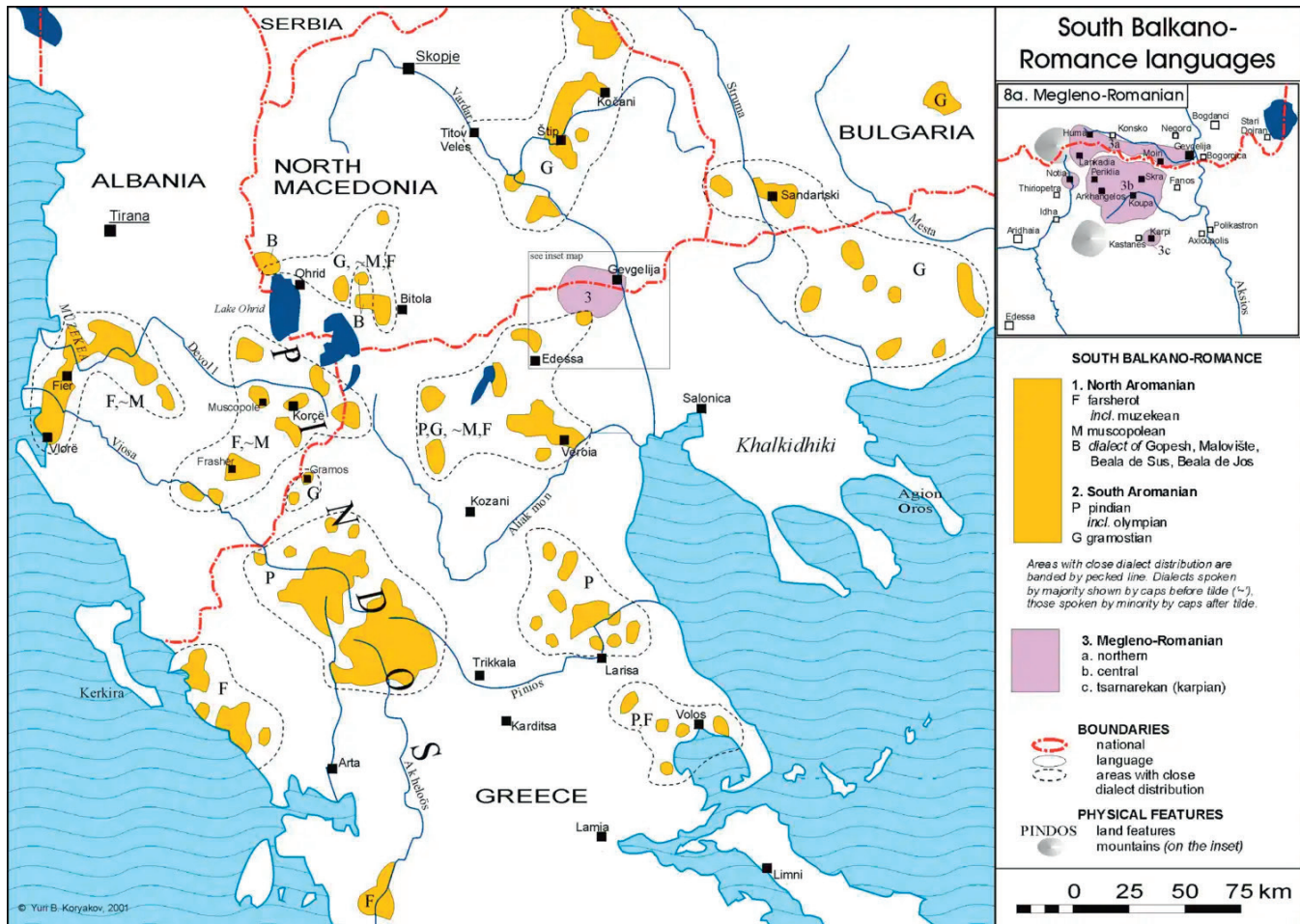


Figure 2 – Distribution of Aromanian speaking areas, © 2001, Koryakov Yuri; based on the map published in “Koryakov Y.B. Atlas of Romance languages. Moscow, 2001”. Map #8. That map is based in turn primarily on Karte 1 from “Kramer J. Rumänische Areallinguistik II. Aromunisch ; Lexikon der romanistischen Linguistik / Hrsg. von G. Holtus, M. Metzeltin, Ch. Schmitt. Tübingen, 1991, Bd. III.”. CC BY-SA



Ancient Greek

The earliest writing in Greek is in a syllabic writing system known as Linear B (c.1450-1200 BCE), which disappeared suddenly in the last phase of the Late Bronze Age along with the distinctive Mycenaean dialect it was used to write. But why was it lost?

Unlike in earlier writing traditions, Linear B was used for a very narrow range of functions, mainly bureaucratic. It had very low social visibility, and very few people would have known how to write in it. The Mycenaean dialect was not adequately supported by this writing system, and both dialect and writing were lost when a widespread economic crisis hit the area.

However, the ancient Cypriot dialect, written in a closely related syllabic system, shows that it was possible for such a writing tradition to survive for several centuries. The problem was not the suitability of the script to the language (as often suspected) but the usage of the system and its social visibility - which was far higher in Cyprus, so lending the writing tradition and thus the dialect greater vitality. This holds important lessons for threatened languages today.

Reference: Steele, P.M. (2023) *Writing Systems and Practices in the Bronze Age Aegean*, Oxford. Especially pages 79-88 and 145-147.



Figure 3 – Late votive inscription in Cypriot syllabic writing, dedicated to Apollo. From Golgoi - Ayios Photios, Cyprus, 3rd century BCE. Metropolitan Museum, New York: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/241922>

2. Recommendations

2.1 Support and funding

Communities where minoritised and endangered languages are spoken require interest and investment in language maintenance fostered within the communities themselves and support from outside parties as well. State authorities can make a considerable difference to the status of a language by giving it official recognition, and by attempting to reduce levels of linguistic discrimination. This would involve removing barriers to the use of the language where possible, allowing and encouraging it to be used in education.

A vital point is that every language and its speaker community is different. Effective support first requires **research**: this can be done in collaboration with professionals such as academic linguists or language advocates, but it must also involve consent and relationship-building with the community itself. Where do speakers live and how are they distributed? How do they feel about their heritage language? Is it written or only spoken? Is there cross-generational competence or interest?

Once language needs have been identified, official support should involve:

- ☑ **raising awareness** of the language and removing barriers to its use
- ☑ **development of healthcare and living support**, e.g. availability of information in the language and access to interpreters
- ☑ **securing funding** to establish lasting educational and support programmes
- ☑ **lobbying for official recognition** of the language at state level
- ☑ **publishing educational materials** and making them available to the community
- ☑ **digital resources** for future sustainability, including technical support for use of the language on the internet and mobile phones
- ☑ **promotion of sustainable linguistic ecologies** that support peaceful co-existence and multilingual expertise



2.2 Writing the language

Some minoritised languages will already have an existing writing tradition, but many do not. For unwritten languages, or those sometimes written in other systems but lacking their own system or orthography, work may be needed to develop a writing system that is accepted by the community. This can empower the language's speakers and demonstrate the value placed on it.

Research has shown that phonological representation (the 'fit' of the writing system to the sounds and structure of the language) is less important than ensuring the community accepts the system and its features. Community acceptance should always be preferred over external intervention, even to the extent that standardisation should be avoided where it proves divisive to communities (e.g. when different dialects are spoken).

Once the writing system has been established, or in the case of pre-existing writing traditions, the next step is to produce written materials. It is especially important to ensure that there is sufficient technical support (and funding) for digital literacy - including the creation of typefaces, Unicode encoding where necessary and the ability to build websites in the target language and use it on mobile phones. **It is crucial that the community is consulted at all these stages**, as research shows the importance of matching a writing tradition to its cultural setting, which means developing written materials that will be useful to the community and fit in with its pre-existing traditions and activities.

2.3 Educational materials and access

Developing written educational materials should be seen as one of the priorities in efforts towards language maintenance. This allows all parties involved in such efforts to shape practical and effective written means of proliferating the language, for example in educational settings whether aimed at children or adults. It is important that such materials are varied, adaptable and appropriate to the community's social and cultural interests, to ensure community 'buy-in' and to build a resilient set of resources. It should also be considered whether written language could be promoted in new domains where the language was not previously seen.

Online resources are often cost-effective, but resources that can be accessed in person are also important, e.g. through libraries as well as stocking schools and voluntary organisations with multiple copies of materials to be used in lessons. It is vital that the community play a central role in using and promoting the resources.

2.4 Community involvement

There is no single model for a speaker community. Some may live in close proximity with sustained contact among speakers, while others may be spread widely, even across national borders, such that individuals do not necessarily have opportunities to communicate with many other speakers of their own language - even if they share a strong sense of identity. Whatever the size and shape of the community, it is vital to work with them, secure their consent and cooperation and act in their expressed interests. This is not only good practice, it also gives a better chance of success: only languages whose speakers want them to continue and have incentive and resources will thrive.



For some languages there will already be community activists, youth groups and other voluntary ventures who are interested in acting on their shared language and identity but lack the resources to do so. For other languages it may be helpful to inspire speakers to form voluntary support groups. Again it is essential to research the nature of the language and its speaker community before attempting any intervention.

2.5 Social visibility for minorities

Minoritised languages and their speaker communities often suffer from the basic fact that many people do not know of their existence and have no familiarity with their language. When a language is spoken out of sight (e.g. at home but never at work or school), it tends to lose efficacy, and a typical response is for people to switch to majority languages and educate their children only in the majority language. This is a common story of language endangerment.

The visibility and acceptance of the language can be fostered by launching a campaign to raise awareness of the language, and by lobbying for signage in the language, and official materials translated into it (e.g. state-issued information, healthcare leaflets, etc). Communities should also be encouraged to develop websites, publications and even radio/TV programmes, apps or games - activities which will require funded support. Social visibility of the written language should be encouraged throughout everyday life, since this has a demonstrable effect on the sustainability of the writing tradition - and so on the language written in it.



3. Project Group

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CREWS Contexts of and Relations between Early Writing Systems, ERC Starting Grant 677758



VIEWS Visual Interactions in Early Writing Systems, UKRI Frontier Research grant no. EP/X028240/1



The Endangered Writing Network, hosted through VIEWS.

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RISE UP Revitalising Languages and Safeguarding Cultural Diversity, HORIZON Coordination and Support Action, Grant ID 101095048

4. Resources: Links

Example resources for a range of European languages, RISEUP

<https://www.riseupproject.eu/resources/>

Guidelines for researchers working with minoritised language communities, RISEUP

<https://www.riseupproject.eu/about/guidelines/>

Endangered Writing Network, VIEWS project

<https://viewsproject.wordpress.com/endangered-writing-network/>

Visualisation of world language endangerment, Glottolog

<https://glottolog.org/langdoc/status>

Atlas of Endangered Alphabets

<https://www.endangeredalphabets.net/>

Language sustainability toolkit, Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages

<https://livingtongues.org/language-sustainability-toolkit/>

World endangered language courses, 7,000 Languages

<https://www.7000.org/languages>

Your Stories, global series of personal reflections on written language, VIEWS project

<https://viewsproject.wordpress.com/your-stories/>





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