Linguistic diversity is diminishing

- Currently, it is estimated that there are nearly 7000 languages spoken around the world (ethnologue.com)
- It is believed that half of the world’s languages will be extinct by the end of the 21st century.
What is an endangered language?

- **Endangered language**: a language that is at risk of falling out of use
- Causes of language endangerment:
  - **Language shift**: the shift of speaking another language

Forces of language shift

- **Language shift**
  - External forces
    - Military activity / violence
    - Economics
    - Religious
    - Cultural
    - Political
    - Educational
  - Internal forces
    - Negative attitudes towards one’s own language
Result of endangered languages

• Often, endangered languages will completely lose all of its speakers.
  – No native speakers
  – No fluent speakers

• This is known as language death (also known as linguicide).

Some endangered languages in East Africa

• Kenya
  – Boni (Cushitic)
  – El Molo (Cushitic)
  – Kiwilwana (Bantu)
  – Kordofanian (Nilo-Saharan)
  – Okiek (Nilo-Saharan)
  – Omotik (Nilo-Saharan)
  – Yaakua (Cushitic)
  – Sanye (Cushitic)
  – Suba (Bantu)

• Tanzania
  – Gweno (Bantu)
  – Hadza (Isolate)
  – Ikoma (Bantu)
  – Ngasa (Nilo-Saharan)

• Ethiopia
  – Anfillo (Omotic)
  – Arbore (Cushitic)
  – Ongota (Cushitic)
  – Opo-Shita (Nilo-Saharan)
  – Shabo (Nilo-Saharan)
Map of endangered languages in Africa

Map of endangered languages in East Africa
What can we do?

- There are many academic and community projects aimed at reducing the damage that occurs from -- or the rate of -- language death.
  - Language documentation and description
  - Language revitalization

Language documentation and description

- **Language documentation**: the process of recording (documenting) a language in an attempt to provide a detailed record of linguistic practices
- **Language description**: the process of describing/analyzing the abstract system of a language

(Genetti and Siemens 2013)
Language documentation and description

- Typically involves:
  - audio/video recording
  - phonetic transcription
  - development of a practical orthography
  - structural analysis

Language documentation and description

- The products of language documentation and description could be used for the sake of
  - posterity
  - furthering academic knowledge
  - informing language learning programs
Table 2.2  Ekegusii phonemic consonant inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>BILABIAL</th>
<th>ALVEOLAR</th>
<th>PALATAL</th>
<th>VELAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ORAL STOP</td>
<td>t</td>
<td></td>
<td>k</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFFRICATE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRICATIVE</td>
<td>ß</td>
<td>s</td>
<td></td>
<td>y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASAL STOP</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLAP</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>r</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPROXIMANT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>j</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Nash 2011)
Language documentation and description

From an academic perspective, language documentation and description are often an individual endeavor.

- Often very little interaction with the community at-large
- Often the contribution to the community is minimal
- These are the results of early linguistic understanding of ethical treatment of research participants
Language revitalization

- **Language revitalization**: an attempt to slow, halt, or reverse language death
- Often involves creating an awareness of current linguistic situation
Language revitalization
Language revitalization

- Many times involves the creation of language learning programs and advocacy for change in local language learning policies.

Language revitalization

- Language revitalization projects often involves the research advocating on behalf of the community.
- Some researchers go even further by implementing models of empowerment.
  - Involves the training of community members (native speakers) in linguistic practices and techniques
  - Aims to give the community the ability to determine their own linguistic goals
  - Collaboration is explicitly articulated as a key concept and underlies this model of field linguistics
Language revitalization

Empowering communities

• Hallmarks of empowerment research (Cameron 1998)
  – It is cooperative with community members and researchers jointly engaged and equal contributors within mutual respectful strategic partnerships
  – participants negotiate the goals, methods, and outcomes
  – grounded in relevant local knowledge traditions
  – capacity-building – enhances and enables community initiatives
  – achieves a balance between research and social action

• **Cameron, Deborah. 1998.** Problems of empowerment in linguistic research. *Cahiers de l'ILSL* 10. 23–38.
