
Using UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment Index (LVE) to Measure Endangerment Levels of Lesser-Known Languages

Dr. Trisha Wangno

Assistant Professor, Neelam Taram, Govt College Yachuli,, Dist: Keyi Panyor, Arunachal Pradesh, 791119

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Abstract:

Nearly 40% of the 6,000 languages spoken worldwide face endangerment or extinction. Approximately 50% of these endangered languages are found in countries such as India, Australia, Mexico, and Indonesia. The smaller the population of a native language, the higher the chances of it facing imminent danger. To safeguard and preserve the rich heritage and age-old knowledge systems of affected languages, social scientists and researchers must take action. At the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO's Programme for Safeguarding Endangered Languages in Paris, detailed measures and tools for assessing language endangerment levels were discussed and proposed. Although most languages face various external threats, scarcely populated languages suffer the greatest risks, though population size alone is not the sole reason. This paper examines the Language Vitality and Endangerment Index (LVE) tools to assist researchers in scientifically highlighting the need for documentation and preservation of languages on the verge of extinction. The endangered Bugun (Khowa) language, spoken in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, India, is used as a case study to illustrate the application of these tools.

Keywords: LVE Scale, Lesser-Known Languages, Language Endangerment, Bugun (Khowa), Arunachal Pradesh

Introduction

To assess the endangerment level of lesser-known languages, UNESCO has developed tools, one of which is the Language Vitality and Endangerment Index (LVE). This tool measures the level of endangerment by classifying languages as Safe, Unsafe, Definitely Endangered, Severely Endangered, Critically Endangered, or Extinct. In this study, we use Bugun (Khowa)^[2], a language spoken in the West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, India, as an example. Bugun is a significant language in Arunachal Pradesh and the mother tongue of 1,432 people, according to

the 2011 Census. This paper focuses on the application of the LVE tool, providing an example through the case of a lesser-known language.

[^2]: The data provided about the Bugun community is derived from my pilot survey conducted for the ICSSR project titled “Language Contact and Convergence: Study of Bugun (Khowa) of West Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh” under Principal Investigator Prof. Madhumita Barbora, Tezpur University, Assam.

Language Vitality and Endangerment Index (LVE)

UNESCO’s expert group on endangered languages established criteria for measuring language vitality to determine how safe or unsafe a language is based on its everyday use. These criteria, outlined by Brenzinger et al. (9–17), are known as the Language Vitality and Endangerment Index (LVE). To characterize a language’s sociolinguistic situation, nine factors are listed: six evaluate a language’s vitality and state of endangerment, two assess language attitudes, and one evaluates the urgency of documentation needs.

Language Vitality Assessment

The nine factors for evaluating a language’s vitality are: 1) Intergenerational Language Transmission; 2) Absolute Number of Speakers; 3) Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population; 4) Shifts in Domains of Language Use; 5) Response to New Domains and Media; 6) Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy; 7) Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use; 8) Community Members’ Attitudes towards Their Own Language; and 9) Type and Quality of Documentation. No single factor should be used in isolation. Even if a language scores high on one factor, it is not considered safe unless assessed across all factors. Below, each factor is discussed, followed by an assessment of the Bugun language based on the provided scales. The abbreviation MT is used for mother tongue.

Factor 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission
Fishman (Can Threatened Languages Be Saved? 2001) states that the most critical factor in evaluating language vitality is whether it is transmitted across generations.

Table 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission Scale

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Description
Safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.
Unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains.
Definitely Endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
Severely Endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.

Critically Endangered	1	The language is used by very few speakers, mostly of great-grandparental generation.
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Extinct	0	There are no speakers.
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Factor 2: Absolute Number of Speakers

There is no strict rule for this factor. Generally, a lower number of speakers increases the risk of endangerment. While population size is a consideration, it should not be the sole factor in assessing language loss.

Factor 3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

Even if a language's population is large, not all may be active speakers. Calculating the percentage of active speakers within the total population identifying with the language is crucial.

Table 2: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Description
Safe	5	All speak the language.
Unsafe	4	Nearly all speak the language.
Definitely Endangered	3	A majority speak the language.
Severely Endangered	2	A minority speak the language.
Critically Endangered	1	Very few speak the language.
Extinct	0	None speak the language.

Factor 4: Shifts in Domains of Language Use

When discussions shift from casual to serious topics, it is essential to observe whether younger speakers can express themselves comfortably. Younger generations often struggle to express themselves in their MT during serious discussions, leading to code-switching or code-mixing, indicating inadequate language transmission.

Table 3: Shifts in Domains of Language Use

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Domains and Functions
Universal Use	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions.
Multilingual Parity	4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.
Dwindling Domains	3	The language is used in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant language begins to penetrate even home domains.
Limited or Formal Domains	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.

Highly Limited Domains	1	The language is used only in a very restricted number of domains and for very few functions.
Extinct	0	The language is not used in any domain for any function.

Factor 5: Response to New Domains and Media

In a rapidly changing world, new domains, particularly in media, are constantly emerging. The younger generation is often the most active in these domains. It is necessary to observe which languages they use and the extent to which they use their MT.

Table 4: Response to New Domains and Media

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	New Domains and Media Accepted by the Endangered Language
Dynamic	5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions.
Robust/Active	4	The language is used in most new domains.
Receptive	3	The language is used in many new domains.
Coping	2	The language is used in some new domains.
Minimal	1	The language is used only in a few new domains.
Inactive	0	The language is not used in any new domains.

Factor 6: Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy

UNESCO's expert committee strongly recommends MT instruction in early education for better cognitive development. However, for smaller languages, study materials in the MT are often unavailable, necessitating instruction in a second language. Implementing MT instruction requires well-designed study materials, which depend on thorough research and documentation.

Table 5: Availability of Study Materials in MT

Grade	Availability of Written Materials
5	There is an established orthography and a literacy tradition with grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and everyday media. Writing in the language is used in administration and education.
4	Written materials exist, and at school, children are developing literacy in the language. Writing in the language is not used in administration.

3	Written materials exist, and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media.
2	Written materials exist, but they may only be useful for some members of the community; for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not part of the school curriculum.
1	A practical orthography is known to the community, and some material is being written.
0	No orthography is available to the community.

Factor 7: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use

Inadequate government policies are a significant cause of language endangerment. Without proper implementation of language policies and mandated MT use in educational institutions, minority languages are rapidly overtaken by dominant ones. Provisions for preserving endangered languages, especially in education, must be examined.

Table 6: Government Attitude towards Minor Languages

Degree of Support	Grade	Official Attitudes towards Language
Equal Support	5	All languages are protected.
Differentiated Support	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.
Passive Assimilation	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.
Active Assimilation	2	Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.
Forced Assimilation	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are neither recognized nor protected.
Prohibition	0	Minority languages are prohibited.

Factor 8: Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language

The most critical factor in language preservation is the attitude of native speakers. Favorable attitudes facilitate revitalization efforts, while unfavorable attitudes increase the likelihood of shifting to a dominant language for economic opportunities.

Table 7: Native Speakers' Attitude towards Their Own Language

Grade	Community Members' Attitudes towards Language
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5	All members value their language and wish to see it promoted.
4	Most members support language maintenance.
3	Many members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
2	Some members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
1	Only a few members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.
0	No one cares if the language is lost; all prefer to use a dominant language.

Factor 9: Type and Quality of Documentation

Revitalization requires proper documentation and research to produce study materials, primers, and dictionaries. Inadequate or absent documentation hinders these efforts.

Table 8: Type and Quality of Documentation in MT

Nature of Documentation	Grade	Language Documentation
Superlative	5	There are comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts, and a constant flow of language materials. Abundant annotated high-quality audio and video recordings exist.
Good	4	There is one good grammar and a number of adequate grammars, dictionaries, texts, literature, and occasionally updated everyday media; adequate annotated high-quality audio and video recordings exist.
Fair	3	There may be an adequate grammar or sufficient numbers of grammars, dictionaries, and texts but no everyday media; audio and video recordings of varying quality or degree of annotation may exist.
Fragmentary	2	There are some grammatical sketches, word-lists, and texts useful for limited linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Audio and video recordings of varying quality, with or without annotation, may exist.

Inadequate	1	There are only a few grammatical sketches, short word-lists, and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable quality, or are completely un-annotated.
Undocumented	0	No material exists.

Assessing the Sociolinguistic Situation of Bugun (Khowa) Based on the LVE Scale

Using survey results and applying them to the LVE scales, the sociolinguistic situation of Bugun is derived as follows:

F1: Intergenerational Language Transmission

Based on the pilot survey, Bugun is spoken in very few domains by the parental generation and above; the younger generation does not use the language with their parents or vice versa. Even in the home domain, dominant languages like Hindi and Nepali are used. Bugun is graded 3, indicating it is Definitely Endangered due to disrupted intergenerational transmission.

F2: Absolute Number of Speakers

According to the 2011 Census, Bugun has 1,432 speakers, a minuscule population. A significant majority do not consider themselves active speakers, and the language is rarely used in most domains. This situation assigns Bugun a grade of 3, indicating it is Definitely Endangered.

F3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

The proportion of speakers within Bugun's small population is even smaller, as native speakers are more confident using Hindi to express emotions like anger, happiness, or sadness. This situation warrants a grade of 2, indicating Severely Endangered.

F4: Shifts in Domains of Language Use

There is a shift in language use among Bugun speakers, as different domains require different languages. For example, Hindi is mandatory in schools and government offices, restricting MT use to the home and, in some cases, formal village gatherings. Per LVE scales, this is graded 2, indicating Limited or Formal Domains.

F5: Response to New Domains and Media

With increasing internet connectivity and social media, new domains emerge. Bugun speakers use Hindi for messaging friends and family, written in Roman script, despite studying Hindi in Devanagari up to the 10th standard. Bugun is not used in new domains, earning a grade of 0, indicating Inactive response to new media.

F6: Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy

No materials exist for MT education or literacy in the Bugun community, grading it 0, as no practical orthography is available, highlighting the urgent need for well-researched study materials.

F7: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies

The preservation of smaller languages depends on governmental attitudes and policy

implementation. Efforts by the Arunachal Pradesh government are limited and sometimes unscientific. No comprehensive state policy supports the preservation of minor languages, leading to passive assimilation with dominant languages. This is graded 3 per LVE scales.

F8: Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language

Most Bugun speakers are genuinely concerned about preserving their language and traditions, but this concern has not yet translated into urgent action. While digital documentation of traditions exists, language studies lag. Many community members support language maintenance and assist research efforts, earning a grade of 2.

F9: Type and Quality of Documentation

Limited documentation exists for Bugun, consisting of a few grammatical sketches, short word-lists, and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings are absent, of poor quality, or un-annotated, grading it 1, indicating Inadequate documentation.

Table 9: Sociolinguistic Situation of Bugun Based on Survey Results on LVE Scale

Factors	Grade	Description
Intergenerational Language Transmission	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.
Absolute Number of Speakers	3	Total number of speakers.
Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population	2	A minority speak the language.
Shifts in Domains of Language Use	2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions.
Response to New Domains and Media	0	Inactive (The language is not used in any new domains).
Availability of Materials for Language Education and Literacy	0	No orthography is available to the community.
Governmental & Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies Including Official Status & Use	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.
Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language	2	Some members support language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.

Type and Quality of Documentation	1	Inadequate (There are only a few grammatical sketches, short word-lists, and fragmentary texts. Audio and video recordings do not exist, are of unusable quality, or are completely un-annotated).
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From Table 9, the LVE index indicates that Bugun is Severely Endangered, as most children do not speak their mother tongue as their first language, and its use is largely restricted to the home domain. The LVE scale underscores the need to raise awareness among native speakers about the imminent risk of extinction and the urgent necessity for linguistic documentation, given the scarcity of existing studies.

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