What is language death?

- **Premises:**

  - A language dies when only one speaker remains or when it is no longer spoken by anyone.
  - Language death is a tangible phenomenon that can be documented and assigned a date, given the finite nature of human populations.
  - People often have a deep emotional attachment to their language and culture, leading to dramatic and emotional reactions to language death.
  - There is significant uncertainty and complexity in studying language death.

- **Proposition:** To estimate and understand the scale of language extinction, it is essential to develop a nuanced perspective.

- **Reasons:**

  - Calculating the number of languages is challenging.
    * Prior to the mid-20th century, reliable data on the number of languages was scarce, with estimates ranging from hundreds to tens of thousands based largely on guesswork.
    * Even today, not all languages have been identified.
    * In some cases, we know a region has a spoken language, but without proper surveys, we cannot determine whether it is a single language with dialects or multiple closely-related languages. Similarly, many linguistic areas have multiple names, making it difficult to discern whether the variation reflects differences in languages or simply naming conventions. For instance, Ethnologue's 7,000 language entries correspond to as many as 40,000 different names.
    * Defining what constitutes a language versus a dialect is complex. Consider distinctions like Old Welsh, Book Welsh, Bible Welsh, Literary Welsh, Modern Standard Welsh, North Welsh, and South Welsh. While mutual intelligibility is a common criterion, sociopolitical factors often outweigh it.
    * Should extinct languages be counted? The languages spoken today represent only a fraction of those historically used. The number of lost languages is likely staggeringly high.
  - Determining how many speakers are needed for a language to be considered alive is difficult.
    * For example, Karitiana in Brazil has 191 fluent speakers in a community of 200. Despite its small size, the language's high fluency rate ensures its survival within this isolated group.
    * Conversely, languages like Yoruba face endangerment due to the dominance of English in education and parental prioritization of English learning for their children. Dutch faces similar pressures.
    * Diagnosing language loss can involve metrics like the percentage of people speaking the language at home or the average age of speakers. However, such data is unavailable for the majority of languages worldwide.
  - Comparing levels of endangerment (e.g., healthy, endangered, extinct) is inherently complex due to the variety of criteria available.
    * Speaker population size is a common metric.
    * Population structure, such as the proportion of young speakers, provides additional insight.
    * Linguistic criteria, including usage domains, grammatical features, and vocabulary retention, can also be considered.
    * Indicators like code-switching, borrowing, grammatical feature loss, and vocabulary reduction may signal endangerment, but they can also occur during healthy language contact. Careful interpretation is required.