

Study Guide for 2023 Public Forum Debate

Resolved: On balance, the world will be a better place if there are fewer languages.

Around 7,000 languages are spoken around the globe. Yet according to UNESCO, a third of the world's languages have no more than 1,000 speakers left, 50 to 90 percent of these languages are projected to disappear by the next century. Supporters of language preservation believe that the loss of a language means the loss of the potential for greater diversity in art, music, literature, and oral traditions, and some research has enumerated cognitive benefits of a multilingual upbringing. However, critics argue that this linguistic diversity means the inability of people around the world to communicate efficiently and/or effectively with one another, especially when about half of the world's population is fluent in only one language. This inevitably leads to the question: Would our world be a better place with fewer languages?

The word "fewer" in the resolution, instead of denoting a specific number or range, should be interpreted simply as a smaller quantity which may bring about a difference in some way in the world. Also note that the word "better" in the resolution is vague, and thus the debaters should set up a comparative framework from the outset, or a set of standards that can be used to evaluate the competing propositions. This can be done through arguing that one impact is bigger (in terms of magnitude), faster (in terms of time frame) or more likely (in terms of probability) than another. Such a comparison of the advantages of one side versus the other helps the judges determine the winner.

As this is a public forum debate, the emphasis should NOT be placed on how languages can be preserved. The con side thus need not detail the plan for nationwide preservation of languages, nor should the pro side ask questions concerning that issue. Instead, the debaters should focus on contending the reasons and evidence for or against having more languages and its impacts.

Following is a list of references meant to serve as groundwork for debaters, which means it is by no means comprehensive or flawless. Many of them also contain information or arguments that may not be directly relevant and thus warrant closer examination. Debaters are encouraged to do more research when working on their cases.

References:

THE COSMOPOLITAN TONGUE: The Universality of English
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20671445>

Why it's a good thing when languages die out: a boorish philistine's take
<https://iea.org.uk/why-its-a-good-thing-when-languages-die-out-a-boorish-philistines-take/>

Languages are vanishing: So what?
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/cultural-animal/200811/languages-are-vanishing-so-what>

Languages: Why we must save dying tongues

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20140606-why-we-must-save-dying-languages>

The race to save the world's disappearing languages

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/saving-dying-disappearing-languages-wikitongues-culture>

Language extinction, and what that means for culture

<https://cultureready.org/blog/language-extinction-and-what-means-culture>

When nobody understands

<https://www.economist.com/international/2008/10/23/when-nobody-understands>

Behemoth, bully, thief: how the English language is taking over the planet

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jul/27/english-language-global-dominance>

When English is not your mother tongue

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01797-0>

Language as a human right (study on the loss of indigenous languages)

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3649091