



The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) assesses “endangered” languages using six factors beyond the number of speakers, including their use in media, education and published resources. By these measures, English in Aotearoa is clearly not in peril.

One exception is technology designed for our variety of English: New Zealand English. Most digital tools work best with American or British accents, while the New Zealand accent is often poorly [recognised](#) or [represented](#). However, the Bill does not make reference to such tools being included.

Most countries explicitly designate official languages in their constitutions, but not all do. Australia, for example, has no official language. Nor do Japan, Mexico or Ethiopia.

Some countries recognise several official languages, such as Singapore and South Africa, while others, such as Iran and Russia, designate just one.

English is an official (de jure) language [in 58 countries](#), including Canada, Hong Kong and Pakistan.

But it has no official status in Great Britain, the United States, Australia, New Zealand and many other countries where it is clearly a dominant language. In these places, it functions instead as a de facto national language. It is not by chance that it reached this status in Aotearoa.

New Zealand’s [Immigration Restriction Act 1899](#) long required migrants not of British or Irish ancestry to complete an application form “in any European language” – in practice, usually English. Versions of what was effectively an English language test remained in place until 1971.

Given that English is today, as it was then, New Zealand’s default language, inscribing it in the country’s constitution would have little practical effect.

## **What really needs protecting**

A key purpose of official language policies is to reverse language “shift” – when people abandon one language in favour of a more dominant one.

This is a major threat to heritage languages – those typically learned at home rather than at school, and which have a non-dominant status. Associated with migrant communities, heritage languages have been spoken in Aotearoa since non-Māori began arriving on its shores.

Today, the country is home to [more than 160 heritage language communities](#). Many, however, have experienced a familiar pattern of language shift. One example is Cantonese, spoken by 54,417 people in New Zealand, according to the 2023 Census.

In a 1993 survey of [Tongan, Greek and Chinese communities](#), Cantonese-speaking families experienced advanced rates of language shift over three generations. By the third generation, only a quarter of families maintained any fluency in Cantonese.

Motivated to assimilate with Anglophone New Zealand, Dutch migrants who arrived in New Zealand during the 1950s lost their language altogether.

The best way to support a language is to encourage people to use it. Today, efforts to revitalise and maintain heritage languages often rely on community groups that run voluntary language classes or organise language weeks.

Digital spaces offer another opportunity. While most people now use digital tools every day, these are usually designed for English – typically American or British English. In fact, significant technology development exists for fewer than 100 of the world's more than 7000 languages.

Unsurprisingly, most of New Zealand's heritage languages remain under-served online.

This creates a digital equity gap for younger generations, who can't engage with their heritage languages on the digital platforms they typically use.

Language is an intrinsic part of identity and culture, and the maintenance of languages leads to better wellbeing outcomes as well as cognitive and professional benefits.

Currently, Aotearoa has no overarching national strategy for languages or language learning. Instead, policy exists in separate areas – including strategies for Pacific languages and te reo Māori – without a single framework covering the country's full linguistic landscape.

Ultimately, language should be treated as a social investment. The new bill's hasty introduction is a missed opportunity to fully understand Aotearoa's linguistic needs.