



Photo: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics/Certie Hoymann

## Forever speechless?

Around 7,000 languages are currently spoken worldwide. Quite a number of them are at severe risk of dying out though, as they are spoken by only a small number of people and are no longer being passed on to future generations. Scientists therefore anticipate that a third, at most – but perhaps only one-tenth – of the languages spoken today will still exist by the end of the 21st century. The significance people attach to their own language depends heavily on social and economic circumstances. Particularly under threat are the languages of population groups with a low social reputation. Even worse is the fact that, with each language that disappears, cultural and intellectual identity is also being lost.

In order to at least document languages and dialects under threat and preserve them for posterity – and for future researchers – the DOBES Program was launched in 2000. As part of this project, scientists from the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics are conducting research in many parts of the world. In northern Namibia, for example, they are focusing on the Khoisan language #Akhoe Haillom, which contains many click sounds. In standard orthography, these are represented by the symbols !, I, II and #. In preparation for a workshop on minority languages in southern Africa, one of the project's local staff members, teacher Mariane Kheimses, interviewed Abakup IlGamllgaeb about his thoughts regarding his mother tongue. The members of the community couldn't imagine allowing just a single representative to speak for everyone at the workshop. Instead, a series of video interviews was shown at the event, enabling all possible opinions to be represented.