Hundreds of languages across the world are dying out. VALENTINA JOVANOVSKI talks to the World Oral Literature Project about the desperate race to save them.

Out of the 6,700 languages spoken by people all over the world, a third are in danger of extinction. Preventing this, or at least slowing the process, is the massive challenge faced by linguists and academics at the World Oral Literature Project, which was established by Cambridge University in January 2009.

Dr Mark Turin, director of the project and research associate at the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, said the project has attracted much interest since its inception.

"It works with local communities and intellectuals who are now collecting and recording tales, myths, songs, legends, proverbs, narratives and other various linguistic forms that can be recorded on a language from vanishing without record," he said. "Each and every language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity of our planet and an expression of the unique social, regional or cultural identity and world view of a people." The project is funding fieldwork and other projects through grants in locations all over the world, including Colombia, Malawi, India, Mongolia and Nepal. It has so far supported the documentation of the oral literature, traditions and languages of some 15 communities.

The work of preserving the world's languages, time-consuming and intensive, comes with a sense of urgency. According to Dr Turin, the process of extinction can be quite rapid.

He said: "We should remember that the evolution of a species or a language takes much longer than its extinction. However, determining whether or not a language is actually endangered is not a precise science.

Researchers need not only to look at the total number of people who speak the language, but also to get a feel for the type of language spoken by the people who speak the language as well. The type of language spoken is the one that is most at risk of dying out, and the level of language documented is the one that is at risk of becoming extinct.

Researchers also study the rate of transmission between parents and children to establish whether the language will be extirpation, whether or not the language will disappear in the future, and the rate at which the language will disappear.

Another key determinant of the survivability of a language is whether it is a writing system. Some languages are only spoken or written. In Nepal, for example, only 10 per cent of the more than 100 languages spoken in the country have writing systems.

Geographically, endangered languages are thought to be concentrated between the Tropic of Cancer and Capricorn, especially around the Equator. Dr Turin said: "Recent scholarship on language endangerment points to an intriguing correlation: Language diversity appears to be inversely related to wealth, and areas rich in language tend to be rich in ecology, species.

Both biodiversity and linguistic diversity are concentrated in the tropics and in inaccessible environments such as the Himalayas, while diversity of all sorts falls off in drier areas. Globally, the majority of people speak just a handful of languages. In fact, 95 per cent of the world's population speaks just 5 per cent of world's living languages.

The world's most popular languages, such as English and Spanish, are often the second languages for many people, but can quickly become primary languages if acquired. Because of this trend, there has been a growth in "heritage" languages. In these, in which people know how to say a few select words, such as grandmother or granddaughter. Once a language has reached this phase, it's like a baby's first steps. And the risk of extinction is more imminent than ever. Globalisation, although also a key element in preserving languages, has caused a major cultural and geographical shift. People looking for a better standard of living move from rural to urban areas, often cities, where they need to speak the most common or nasal language.

There is also a perception that traditional languages are outdated or unspeakable, whereas newly spoken languages are seen as worldly and sophisticated.

Dr Turin said: "People think that to be modern they have to lose their old ways of the world of modernity. The project is trying to counteract this trend and has received support in its efforts from some international organisations. For example, the project has been funded by the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, which has a total population of just over 70,000 in the year 2000." The world's languages are dying at an alarmingly fast rate. The project is trying to counteract this trend and has received support in its efforts from some international organisations. For example, the project has been funded by the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, which has a total population of just over 70,000 in the year 2000."