The Ethnologue. The mere title among professionals such as linguists and anthropologists or foreign language software specialists and government agencies invokes the image of an almost canonical book that occupies a special place on a frequently accessed bookshelf. This book, first published in 1951 and now in its sixteenth edition, has been an invaluable "end-all-be-all" for those with frequent language information demands needed at a moment’s notice. However, the book’s appeal seems to be aimed at a much broader audience as a reference tool. Within the dense information on 6,909 living languages, there are many user-friendly features and generalized sections to aid the novice Ethnologue user.

The Ethnologue is divided into three primary sections with a brief introduction that contains statistical summaries, analyses and information pertaining to creoles, sign languages, language isolates, mixed languages, and 38 unclassified languages. One particularly striking statistic revealed in this section illustrates the Ethnologue’s rationale in collecting data on languages: Only 6% of the world’s languages have over one million speakers and account for 94% of the population while 94% of the world’s languages are spoken by only 6% of the world’s population! Other statistical data reveals that the country with the highest distribution of living and indigenous languages is Papua New Guinea with 830 languages and that the United States contains the most immigrant languages of any country in the world.

Part II includes an incredible 208 pages of extremely detailed and multi-colored maps of all languages spoken in 157 different countries. It is clear that the publishers focused a great deal of effort and precision into achieving the clarity of these maps, for experienced as well as novice users. As a visual learner, the maps of the Ethnologue were by far my preferred location, though being able to geographically locate a language to see historical, familial, and political ties seems useful for anyone.
Part III provides a number of indexes for quick reference and orientation since the book is quite "biblical" in proportion with 1,248 pages. This edition has clearly synchronized languages with the updated International Organization of Standards codes referred to as ISO-639-3, which assigns a three-letter coded label to every known language past or present. The "Language Name Index" provides all coded language names in alphabetical order and their appropriate location in the book. This system could be useful for a researcher looking for a particular language that crosses national boundaries and is referred to by different names for geographical, political and cultural reasons.

As a reference tool, the book cannot be beat, but it does raise some controversial questions. One interesting fact is that the publisher, SIL International (Summer Institute of Linguistics) has a very strong religious base and this information is not revealed in this publication. SIL International was originally initiated to train missionaries to translate and print the Bible in indigenous languages around the world (Erard 2005). This would explain why in Part 1 of the demographic data many of the language entries also note when the first Bible was available in that particular language.

One possible limitation of the book is that many of the documented sources are dated. Looking at the very first country entry in Part I—Algeria, I was surprised to see that most of the country information was provided from sources with dates that ranged from 1962 to 1985. Individual language source material listed under Algeria was more recent but ranged from 1987 through the mid-1990s. Only one of the 18 languages listed was from a source after the year 2000. Many other country and language entries followed this same pattern. With a statement in the introduction that the focus of this edition is on minority languages, dates of the data provided seem rather contradictory to this statement overall. Even country information and some language information from the United States is based on the 1990 census and is not updated with 2000 census statistics.

This collection of language information also raises questions about the status of languages. The current editor and linguist, M. Paul Lewis, in a New York Times interview in 2005, discussed how "language is a lot like oatmeal...fuzzy around the edges" (Erard 2005). How then is a determination made on how to actually count languages when they are constantly changing and shifting? How do the publishers of the Ethnologue make the distinction between a language and a dialect or between "living" and "extinct" languages, as these areas of study seem to be much grayer and "fuzzier" with globalization and current revitalization efforts occurring for many languages? Their logic is partially addressed in the introduction, but the publishers appear to rely on an adapted version of Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) system of "ethnolinguistic variability" to determine viability of a language to assist in their counting. The scale ranges from a "1" that equals a language "that is used in education, work, mass media, and government nationwide" to an "8" that is indicative of a language with "the only remaining speakers of the language [being] members of the grandparent generation." One issue with this type of standardized scale is the obvious hierarchical prominence placed on dominant languages utilized in the public sphere in the occupational and academic arenas opposed to those marginalized languages utilized in the private sphere in the home and for sacred ritual and religious practices. Utilization of this scale and other decisional methods should be seriously questioned, especially by such an influential book that many will take and read at face value as current and verifiable.

For any of the questions and criticisms that this book might raise, Ethnologue's efforts at updating and reporting on sign languages utilized around the world should be strongly applauded. The book contains 126 different sign languages, which may be surprising to some. By continuing to place an emphasis on all languages utilized by humans around the world, Ethnologue pushes the envelope on language definitions still often found in introductory phonetics and phonology textbooks.

Overall, the amount of comprehensive documentation provided and the sheer overall usefulness of the Ethnologue outweighs the critiques raised here. The cost is a little pricey, but the book delivers. This book will always be within arm's reach on my personal bookshelf and there won't be dust on its cover.

REFERENCES CITED