
Language diversity, endangerment, and public awareness

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A WEEK LAST MONDAY was St Valentine's Day. Next Tuesday will be St David's Day. Everyone knows that. If you forget, Google will alter its logo to remind you. But what day was commemorated last Monday, 21 February? Few people know, and Google's logo remained its usual particoloured self.

Last Monday was International Mother Language Day. It is the annual celebration of the importance of maternal languages and linguistic diversity, established by UNESCO in 1999 and first observed in 2000. The day was chosen because on 21 February 1952 several students campaigning for the recognition of Bangla as a state language of Pakistan were killed by police. It is one of only two special days devoted to languages each year. The other is 26 September, the European Day of Languages. This is broader than its name suggests. It is an annual celebration of the languages used in Europe, initiated by the Council of Europe in 2001 as an outcome of the European Year of Languages. The remit includes all languages used within the region, not just those which are indigenous to Europe. Chinese is a European language now.

The European Year of Languages, 2001. That was a year organised by the European Union and the Council of Europe, in which 45 European countries participated. Four years later, in the USA, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages organised a Year of Languages. In 2006, the African Academy of Languages, launched the Year of African Languages at the African Union. And then, in 2008, the big one: the International Year of Languages, 2008.

Let me now be brutally honest. How many of these years did you know about? And, if you knew about them, do you still remember them? And if you remember them, do you do anything to celebrate them? Many language-aware teachers celebrate the days in schools around the country. But they are a tiny number, compared with the millions who are aware of, for example, St Valentine's Day.

One reason for the collective memory loss is that several UN years competed for attention during 2008. Not only was it the International Year of Languages but also the

International Years of Sanitation, the Reef, Planet Earth, and the Potato. There was a notable complementarity among these initiatives. To survive, humans need a viable environment, drinkable water, and food – prerequisites identified through the focus on the Earth, Sanitation, and the Potato. But the fourth prerequisite for humanity is language. Once human beings have the means to exist, then they must co-exist. And co-existence as humans is possible only through language.

It was, naturally enough, Planet Earth that attracted most public attention in 2008, and continues to attract most attention. I say 'naturally enough', because there is no point in us worrying about diversity of languages if there are no people left to use them. In all parts of the world where endangered languages exist, we need to give priority to survival and quality of life. Medical and economic wellbeing are prerequisites for linguistic wellbeing.

But a second reason for the lack of public awareness is a lack of marketing on the part of the organisations concerned. And that relates to a further issue: that there was precious little to market. The Resolution setting up the IYL had 33 operative clauses or sub-clauses. The vast majority dealt with internal organisational matters at the UN, such as recommending parity among the six official languages and identifying ways in which the UN operation can be improved. Only three of its clauses were of general import, but don't hold your breath, expecting something of great originality to emerge from them:

OP 23 affirmed that 'linguistic diversity is an important element of cultural diversity'.

OP 24 reaffirmed that 21 February should be proclaimed International Mother-Language Day, and calling upon member states and the secretariat to promote the preservation and protection of all languages.

OP 25 announced the International Year, and asked member states 'to develop, support and intensify activities aimed at fostering respect for and the promotion and protection of all languages (in particular endangered languages), linguistic diversity and multilingualism'.



Poster advertising UNESCO's International Mother Language Day.

In the language of international diplomacy, such statements are important. But to the outside world, they are bland, vapid, anodyne.

I am not disputing their importance. On the contrary. The intellectual health of the planet is dependent on multilingualism. Without exposure to the alternative visions of the world expressed by other languages, our view of ourselves and of our planet remains inward-looking, unchallenged, and parochial. It is only by experiencing another language and culture – whether at home or abroad – that we discover the defining contours of our own. That is why it is important for the UN to affirm, and to keep on affirming, the principle of linguistic diversity as a basic human good. It fosters an intellectual and emotional climate in which triumphalist language attitudes and organisations feel increasingly uncomfortable and outmoded. Great progress has already been made with relation to racism. Antagonism to linguistic diversity is a first cousin of racism.

But the fact remains that the IYL and the other Years have not been the successes their creators wanted. They have already receded from public consciousness – remembered with affection only by those already committed to the cause. Why is this so, and what can be done about it? These are the questions I want to address in this paper.

Background

Let me briefly review the recent history of this subject, so that we can see where we are. The 1990s was a revolutionary decade in the way it brought the language crisis into the forefront of academic and political attention. It is remarkable what we have in fact managed to do since 1991, which was when the crisis began to be systematically addressed through a number of visionary articles and public statements, notably those arising out of the Endangered Languages Symposium organised by the Linguistic Society of America in 1991, and the statement emanating from the International Congress of Linguists in Quebec in 1992. UNESCO came on board in 1993, with its Endangered Languages Project. By 1995, the organisations began to appear – such as the Tokyo Clearing House, the UK Foundation for Endangered Languages, and the US Endangered Language Fund. In the mid-1990s the articles began to build up, both polemical (in the best sense) and descriptive, and collections of papers began to appear. The first exposés aimed at a more general public were published. Then by the turn of the century, we find a flurry of book-length expository syntheses of the topic. In this respect, the years 2000-2001 were special years, with three general books coincidentally appearing from Claude Hagege, Suzanne Romaine and Daniel Nettle, and myself – very different perspectives, but with a single focus.

Within a decade, in short, the academic linguistic world had begun to realise that Something Was Up – or at least those linguists did who still retained an interest in real languages as part of their professionalism! The statistics, whether expressed by pessimists (80 per cent extinction within a century) or optimists (25 per cent extinction), were compelling, and the accounts of ongoing endangerment, as well as of successful revitalisation when conditions are right, were persuasive. A middle-of-the-road figure was 3000

‘One language dies every two weeks’

languages so seriously endangered that they were likely to die out during the course of the present century: that is one language dying on average every two weeks. The descriptive literature having grown dramatically, it was possible to make informed and judicious appraisals of the general situation. And I think now we all know the answers, at least in general terms, to the basic theoretical questions: what are the factors which lead to language death? why are we experiencing this crisis now? and what conditions need to be present in order to revitalise a language? We are also aware of the central role of documentation in addressing these questions. Obviously there is still a great deal of empirical and procedural work to be done, and we have hardly begun to develop ‘documentation theory’ as part of an ‘applied preventive linguistics’ – by which I mean the application of our theoretical, descriptive, and methodological advances to individual endangered situations. We do not yet have a typology of intervention and best practice to match those available in some other applied linguistic domains, such as language teaching and speech pathology. But at least all these issues are recognised, and research is ongoing. So what do we do next? There is a dimension of our responsibility which still receives hardly any recognition – the gap which exists between academic awareness of these matters and the awareness of the general public. This, I believe, is the domain which next demands our attention.

Anyone who works in the conservation field will tell you that bridging this gap is the most difficult goal to achieve. It has taken the ecological movement as a whole over a century to bring the world to its present state of consciousness about endangered plant and animal species. For example, the National Audubon Society in the US was founded in 1866: we have been bird-aware for nearly 150 years. For world heritage sites, we have the highly successful UNESCO programme, begun in 1972. Greenpeace, the year before, 1971. The World Wildlife Fund, 1961. The World Conservation Union, 1948. It took over 30 years before this Union was able to establish a World Conservation Strategy (1980), which led to the principles laid down in the booklet 1991 document *Caring for the Earth*.

How, and how much

Compared with such time-frames, linguistic achievements by way of consciousness-raising within just a decade have been remarkable indeed. Thanks to an enormous amount of effort by a fairly small number of individuals and institutions, we have made great progress in relation to the three criteria which we know must be present before progress can be made with an endangered language. First, there is what might be called the ‘bottom-up’ interest – the speech-community itself must want its language saved – and there are now many recorded accounts of how attitudes can be sensitively managed and energies channelled to ensure that this happens. It is also true that we have learned from

our mistakes, in this connection. Second, there must be ‘top-down’ interest: the local and national government need to be in sympathy with the philosophy of language revitalisation and supportive of the task in hand. ‘Top-down’ also includes obtaining the support of international political organisations, such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, who are crucial in forming an appropriate political climate within which pressure can be brought to bear in difficult situations. We need only reflect for a moment on the number of political statements which were made over the past 20 years to realise that there has been enormous progress in this respect – but we are still, it seems, some way from the goal of an unequivocal United Nations statement of human linguistic rights.

But neither bottom-up nor top-down support are enough, without the third criterion – cash. We know that implementing a minority language policy is expensive, in the short-term. In the long-term, of course, any policy of balanced multilingualism, in which minority languages are respected and protected, guarantees massive savings – if for no other reason, by avoiding the huge expenditure (often, in terms of life as well as money) which arises when people, seeing their linguistic identity threatened, take civil action to protect themselves and their future. But the initial outlay does cost money – though not huge amounts. It is not as expensive as we might think, to foster a climate of language diversity and sustainability. Take the case of the 3000 most endangered languages. It was estimated a few years ago, by the Foundation for Endangered Languages, that a figure of around \$55,000 per language would provide a basic grammar and dictionary for a language that had received negligible documentation, assuming two years of work by one linguist. Another estimate suggested that we would need to allow a linguist three years, and there would then not be much change from \$200,000, after taking into account a salary, fees for indigenous language consultants, travel, equipment, accommodation, publication of the findings, and the provision of basic facilities for revitalisation. Another linguist took an even broader view, anticipating in-depth studies, the development of an audio-visual archive, and a wider range of publications and teaching materials, concluding that the estimate per language would be more like 15 years and \$2 million. Conditions vary so much that it is difficult to generalise, but – looking for common ground between these figures – a figure of \$65,000 per year per language cannot be far from the truth. If we devoted that amount of effort over three years for each of the 3,000 cases referred to in Chapter 1, we would be talking about some \$585 million. That may seem like a lot of money; but, to put it in perspective, it is equivalent to just over one day’s OPEC oil revenues (in an average year). Or a seventy-fifth of the worth of the richest man in America. Or a banker’s bonus.

The sums are tiny, but enough to put governments off, and enough to give support organisations (such as the Endangered Language Fund) a tough time finding capital to make even a small contribution to the present need. That is why the efforts of the large organisations, such as the Volkswagen Stiftung and the Lisbet Rausing Charitable Fund have to be loudly applauded. I would never have dreamed, ten years ago, that two such bodies would be helping our cause to the extent that they are. But the question remains,

why are there not more of them? Why, if language conservation is the intellectual equivalent of biological conservation, have we yet made so little progress in obtaining the requisite funding? The International Union for the Conservation of Nature had a budget of 135 million Swiss Francs in 2010, and heaven knows how many millions more goes into the support of biological conservation projects worldwide. Compared with that, the support for linguistic projects is so far minuscule. Why?

‘Very few people are aware of the existence and scale of the problem’

Public awareness

The answer, I believe, is that still very few people are aware of the existence and the scale of the problem; and there are many people who still need to be persuaded that the situation is a problem. To take the latter point first: many believe in the Babel myth – that a single language on earth would guarantee a mutually intelligible and therefore peaceful planet (as was assumed to be present before the ‘curse’ of Babel differentiated languages). However, Genesis chapter 10 shows that there were languages (in the plural) on earth before the Babel event (which is reported in chapter 11), and there is widespread evidence from all over the planet that the history of monolingual communities does not prevent civil wars (Vietnam, Cambodia, UK, USA...). But leaving this issue aside, the level of unawareness of the language crisis is remarkable, and contrasts dramatically with awareness in other eco-domains. I doubt whether there is anyone in the thinking world who is not now aware, even if only dimly, of the crisis facing the world’s bio-ecology. By contrast, only a tiny proportion of these people have any awareness at all of the crisis in linguistic ecology. This is the gap I referred to above: Us who know versus Them who don’t. How many are Them? Some time ago, in preparing for a radio programme, I asked a series of passers-by in the street whether they were aware that so many of the world’s languages were dying. The people who claimed to be aware (whether they really were or not I do not know) were one in four. The other three had no idea what I was talking about. A similar exercise at the University of Manchester got the same result. And I get the same result today. Seventy-five per cent of the population do not know there is an issue, therefore; and a fair number of the remaining twenty-five per cent do not believe that it is an important issue. Many of these are the opinion-formers of this world – such as journalists, politicians, media personalities, and businessmen. How can we get through to Them?

We can of course lecture to Them, and write books for Them – but let us not fool ourselves. Even if one of our

academic books sold out, we would be talking only about a few thousand copies. I am not so naive as to think that a book like my *Language Death* will ever get into a Christmas must-buy best-selling list. Academic textbooks have an important role in forming intellectual opinion, but they are not the way to bridge the public awareness gap, and certainly not if we are in a hurry. We have to look in other directions. In fact there are several ways of achieving this goal, but the most important ways we have hardly begun to explore, and not at an institutional level. I believe there are four primary means of engaging with the general public in relation to our subject – using the media, the arts, the Internet, and the school curriculum. I shall concentrate on the first two, given the time available, and refer only briefly to the last two – but all four need to be involved in any systematic effort to bring public awareness about linguistic ecology to the same level as that which exists in the biological domain.

The media

Some progress has been made with reference to the first way: enlisting the support of the media. I have been quite impressed with the increased interest shown by some sections of the media during the past decade. Several articles have appeared in general-interest magazines and newspapers. There have been pieces, often illustrated with stunning photographs, in such periodicals as *Prospect*, *National Geographic*, *Scientific American*, and even the British Airways in-flight magazine, *High Life*. Radio has also served us well. Since 2000-1 I know of a dozen or so radio programmes devoted to the topic of language death on the BBC's two main documentary channels, Radio 3 or Radio 4 – in one case a series (called 'Lost for Words') of four half-hour programmes. There seems to have been similar radio interest elsewhere: I have contributed to programmes being made in the United States, Canada, and Australia, and several of my linguistic colleagues have too. Television, by contrast, has been less interested. Since the mid-1990s I know of ten proposals to the various UK television channels for documentaries or mini-series on language death, and although three of these reached a quite advanced stage of preparation – including in one case scripted and partly filmed material – none ever reached completion. The only success story was the component on language death which was included in the series *Beyond Babel*, which has now been screened in over 50 countries, and which is available on DVD.¹ This was, ironically, an account of how English has become a world language; but the producers sensibly accepted the argument that there was another side to the coin.

We should not take our television failure too personally, by the way. We must not forget that there has never been a television blockbuster series on the general topic of language, as such, anywhere in the world. There have of course been individual programmes on some of the 'sexier' aspects of language – such as child language acquisition, or sign language, or speech disability. And there have been a number of series or programmes on individual languages. English, as you might expect, gets the most attention. *The*

Story of English appeared in the 1980s – a huge eight-hour transatlantic co-production – and another eight-hour epic, Melvyn Bragg's *The Adventure of English* told the same story. A few other individual languages have attracted interest too. A six-part series, *The Story of Welsh* was made on BBC Wales, presented by Huw Edwards; and I know of similar programmes on Breton, Irish, and a number of other European minority languages, as well as on the indigenous languages of Australia, the USA, and Canada.

But in all these cases, the creative energy is entirely inward-looking. These programmes tell the story of endangerment only as it affects the individual communities – the Welsh, the Bretons, or whoever. None of them takes the requisite step back and looks at the language endangerment situation as a whole. The nearest you get is when a programme deals with more than one language together, such as a programme made for the Netherlands TV network, in 2001, which looked at the similar plights of Welsh and Frisian, and inevitably began to generalise as a consequence. Another is an ongoing project by the Czech film-maker Michael Havas, whose project on a single Brazilian language, spoken by the Kranak, 'Brazilian Dream', is conceived as a symbol of the world situation. Such perspectives are rare. It seems very difficult to get people who are desperately anxious about the state of their own language to devote some of their energy to considering the broader picture. It is short-sighted, because each endangered language can learn something from the situation of other languages – why some languages seem to be doing better than others. Nonetheless, in 2011 our theme still awaits effective television treatment.

Films are the ideal medium for our purposes, because they enable us to see and hear diversity in action. And one of the most promising developments in the past few years has been to see a slow but steady growth in cinematic efforts to capture language diversity and endangerment, from film-makers in several parts of the world. One of the most striking comes from Barcelona: *Ultima Palabra* (The Last Word), a documentary made by Grau Serra and Roger Sagues in 2003 about three endangered languages in Mexico (Lacandon, Popoluca, and Mayo). Another is *Voices of the World*, made in 2005 by the Danish film-makers Janus Billeskov Jansen and Signe Byrge Sørensen. The success story of recent years has got to be *The Linguists*, which got rave reviews at the Sundance Film Festival in 2008, and later an Emmy nomination. But that is an isolated case.

As I say, we should not take the lack of a television presence too personally. There are reasons why television executives do not like programmes on language. I know what they are because I have been in the fortunate position, thanks to my work in broadcasting over the past 20 years, of being able to ask programme-commissioners. The usual

'Television executives do not like programmes on language'

¹ From Infonation Media: <http://www.beyondbabel.co.uk/>

answer is that language is too abstract and complex a subject. The decision-makers are either thinking back to their days of studying grammar in school (broadcasting senior management is of the age when they all had to parse sentences and study prescriptive grammar) or they have had a close encounter of the third kind with Chomsky, and it has scared them. They are also worried by the generality of the subject: that language does not fit neatly into a TV niche, such as current affairs, or comedy. They are petrified by the risk of the academic approach making people switch off. Even though there have been highly successful TV series by academics – Jonathan Miller's *The Body in Question* on human physiology, Simon Schama's series on history, Lord Winston's on medicine – when it comes to language, the eyes glaze over. Even the specific-language programmes are affected. Language programmes tend only to be presented by well-known personalities – *The Adventure of English* by Melvyn Bragg; *The Story of Welsh* by Huw Edwards. If we did ever manage to get a TV series on language death up and running, heaven knows who they would get to present it – Oprah Winfrey, probably.

Mind you, would that be such a bad thing? If the content is right and the quality is assured, then a big media personality would probably do our subject the world of good. The BBC radio series such as *Word of Mouth* (with Michael Rosen) and *Fry's English Delight* (with Stephen Fry) have already helped to raise language awareness. And this leads to my next point, that we are still some way from attracting the interest of most of the general population (which of course means the politician-electing, fund-raising population) in our crisis. Bottom-up, top-down, cash – my three criteria will all operate at their best if a profound awareness of the nature and likelihood of language death enters the general population. And personalities can help make this happen. But it is more than awareness that we need. We also need enthusiasm. People have to be enthused about the issues surrounding language death. Their emotions as well as their intellects have to be engaged. I think we have done quite a good job in the past decade under the latter heading: a lot of people – well, one in four, anyway – now have a degree of intellectual understanding of the issues which they did not have before. But how many have an emotional grasp? How many would weep over a dying language, as I have seen people weep over a dying animal species. How many experience real joy at the prospect of a revitalised language – like the moment in *Beyond Babel* when you hear Cally Lara, a teenager from Hupa Valley in Northern California, say:

As long as we're here, as long as the valley is here, as long as our culture is alive, the language and teaching the language will be a part of what we do. It's our responsibility.

And his chum, Silis-chi-tawn Jackson, adds:

If it's up to me, this language is going to go on.

This makes my heart, as well as my mind, leap, to hear teenagers say that. But how many others share in this sense of celebration? Indeed, how many opportunities are there to celebrate? Another question I ask people, these days, is: Do they know when World Language Day is, or World Mother Language Day? Hardly anyone knows.

The arts

How do we get from consciousness to conscience? We have to engage with people's sensibilities, and this is the most difficult of tasks. In fact I know of only two ways of doing it – one is through religion, the other is through the arts. And of the two, the arts turns out to be the more general, because it transcends the distinction between theism and a-theism. I have personal experience of its widespread appeal, because I have been the director of a new arts centre (the Ucheldre Centre) in my home town of Holyhead in North Wales, over the past 20 years, and the one thing I have learned, from our programme of art exhibitions, sculptures, films, plays, concerts, and performances of all shapes and sizes is that everyone, everyone, appreciates the arts, regardless of age and class. They may appreciate different kinds of art, of course; but even the people in my town who turn their noses up at an exhibition of abstract art or a concert of medieval music, calling it elitist, come to the arts centre when we are showing a James Bond film or putting on a Christmas pantomime for the children. And when I visit their houses, I see pictures on the walls and ornaments on the mantelpieces. Art reaches out to everyone. As Oscar Wilde said, 'We spend our days, each one of us, in looking for the secret of life. Well, the secret of life is in art'.

So, if we want a means of getting our message across to everyone in the most direct and engaging way, my belief is that we should be making maximum use of the arts, in order to do so. If we want Them to see what the situation is, the artists can help us more than anyone else. Repeatedly we find people acknowledging the point: US poet Archibald Macleish put it like this: 'Anything can make us look; only art can make us see'. Another poet, Robert Penn Warren: 'the poem is not a thing we see – it is, rather, a light by which we may see – and what we see is life'. Picasso: 'We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise truth'. And, as if drawing attention to the difference between the media and the arts, we have Ezra Pound: 'Literature is news that stays news'. But my favourite quotation, in this connection, is from Disraeli, in the Preface to his novel, *Coningsby*: 'Fiction, in the temper of the times, stands the best chance of influencing opinion'. The way forward is through the arts, in its broadest sense, to include everything sensory – visual, verbal, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory – that we consider artistic. And here we meet another kind of gap. For we as academics have not been much interested in the arts, and the artists (in this broadest sense) have not been much interested in us. This in my view is where we next need to direct some of our own creative energies.

It is not difficult to justify my claim. During the past decade I have been trying to find examples of artists who have addressed the issue of language death within their areas of expertise, and I have found very little. I have asked hundreds of artists if they know of anything. Let me begin with the visual arts. I have seen whole exhibitions devoted to plant and animal conservation, but never seen a painting which deals with language conservation. I know of nothing in photography or ceramics or textiles. Artists are continually using the terms of language to define their roles – the 'language of' photography, paintings which 'speak to us'. But they do not seem to have focused on language itself

as a subject. I have come across just one sculpture – the living sculpture produced by Rachel Berwick, which some of you may have seen in New York or London in 1997-8. It was based on an event said to have taken place when the explorer Alexander von Humboldt was searching for the source of the Orinoco, in South America, in 1801. He met some Carib Indians who had recently exterminated a neighbouring tribe (possibly a Maypuré group) and captured some of their domesticated parrots. The parrots still spoke words of the now extinct language, and von Humboldt – so the story goes – was able to transcribe some of them. Having heard this story, Rachel Berwick, professor of sculpture at Yale University, saw its intriguing possibilities, and constructed an artwork based upon it: she designed a special enclosure in which were displayed two Amazon parrots who had been trained to speak some words from Maypuré. Approaching this work for the first time, you are nonplussed. Once you read the explanation, you look at the parrots with awe, and wait to hear some words. You do not forget the experience.²

I would have expected music and dance to be especially interested in this topic. Music has been characterised as ‘the universal language of mankind’ (Longfellow), ‘the speech of angels’ (Carlyle), ‘the only universal tongue’ (Samuel Rogers). You would expect these metaphors to have motivated composers to reach for their staves to deal with linguistic issues. But I have not yet encountered pieces which deal with the subject explicitly. The topic of language death deserves at least a symphony, a fantasia, an opera, a ballet, or – to change the genres – a large-scale jazz piece, or a guitar extravaganza. Even the folk-singers have failed to lament about the world situation. The nearest I have come to a major musical work is the marvellous score Philip Glass composed for Godfrey Reggio’s film, *Powaqqatsi*, the second of his Hopi *qatsi* trilogy – the name means ‘a way of life [technology, in this vision] that consumes the life forces of other beings in order to further its own life’. The anthem composed for that film well expresses the notion of loss, but Reggio’s theme is cultural destruction in general, as a result of technology, not linguistic loss in particular. A few years ago I was talking to the composer Michael Berkeley on Radio 3 in ‘Private Passions’, and I asked him whether he knew of anything about language death. He did not.

We might expect, from its nature, that the world of the verbal arts would yield more positive results – the world of poetry, drama, the novel, the short-story. Here too, though, there is very little. I know of no novel directly concerned with the general theme, though there are a few which reflect on an individual cultural or linguistic situation – such as Joan Bodon (Jean Boudou) writing on the death of Occitan (e.g. *Lo Libre de Catoia*), the Argentinian writer Leopoldo Brizuela’s fable about an imaginary encounter between English and Patagonian cultures (*Inglaterra, una fabula*), or the Abkhazian writer Bagrat Shinkuba’s account of the demise of Ubykh, translated as *Last of the Departed*). There is Alphonse Daudet’s short story, ‘The Last Class’, about the reaction of a schoolchild to the news that French was being replaced by German in his Alsatian school. But I know of no novel and only one short story on the general theme, by the Australian writer David Malouf. In a succinct, breathtaking

four-page tale, ‘The Only Speaker of his Tongue’, he tells the story of a lexicographer visiting a last speaker.

Moving into the genre of poetry, a few writers *have* taken the theme on board. I have been collecting poems on the subject, and so far have about 30. But the genre which puzzles me most, because it is the genre most obviously applicable to expound our subject, is theatre. Where are the plays? Here too there have been works which deal with the problems of a particular linguistic/cultural situation – the best example I know is Brian Friel’s *Translations*, about Irish. Another is Louis Nowra’s *The Golden Age*, about the community discovered in the wilds of Tasmania in 1939, for whom the playwright created a special variety of speech. But what plays deal with the problems of language endangerment in general, or which generalise from individual instances in the way R S Thomas’s poem did? Harold Pinter’s *Mountain Language*, a 20-minute virtuoso explosion, was my solitary discovery, but that is of little general use for it deals only with the topic of linguistic genocide which, relevant as it is for some parts of the world, is only a part of the overall picture. Apart from that, until recently I knew of only my own play, *Living On* (1998).³ But in November 2010 there was some progress: in Australia, Kamarra Bell Wykes’ play, *Mother’s Tongue*, was staged in Perth by the Yirra Yakin Aboriginal Corporation; and Julia Cho’s The Language Archive was staged in New York – really about personal relationships, but its lead character is a linguist constructing an archive of endangered languages.

However, we have to be realistic. Language death is not mainstream theatre. It is not mainstream anything. Can you imagine Hollywood taking it on? It is so far outside the mindsets of most people that they have difficulty appreciating what the crisis is all about, because they are not used to thinking about language as an issue in itself. Somehow we need to change these mindsets. We need to get people thinking about language more explicitly, more intimately, more enthusiastically. Interest in language is certainly there, in the general population – most people are fascinated by such topics as where words come from, or what the origin of their town’s name is, or whether their baby’s name means anything; they are certainly prepared to play Scrabble and a host of other language games ad infinitum; and language games are often found on radio and television – but a willingness to focus that interest on general issues, a preparedness to take on board the emotion and drama inherent in the situation of language endangerment, is not something that happens much. This a goal which artists can help us reach.

‘The arts are the greatest untapped resource that we can exploit’

I believe the arts are the greatest untapped resource that we can exploit to help us do what has to be done. We know the urgency. We need the input of artists, and we need it

² See the website at <http://www.rachelberwick.com/Maypore.php>

³ http://www.davidcrystal.com/DC_articles/Creative9.pdf

now. Somehow – perhaps through UNESCO – the artists of the world need to be mobilised in our support, using all the resources at their disposal. Artists are extraordinary people. Once you catch their interest you do not have to persuade them to act. By their nature, they cannot not. The trick is to draw their attention to the fact that language, as such, is an issue. Give an artist an opportunity and he/she will take it. The problem is that, in so much work, opportunities are missed – not because of any active antagonism towards the language question, but simply because people have just not thought of it as an issue. A few years ago I returned from Brazil clutching a beautiful glossy art-book of photographs on the country, in which the writer and photographer had gone out of their way to find communities and environments at risk. Not a single mention of the Brazilian language crisis, in the whole book. There were statistics about the amount of rainforest which was disappearing, but none about the number of languages which were disappearing. The writer, I suspect, had simply not noticed it, or had taken it for granted, or had forgotten about it. The photographer had not even conceived of the exciting artistic challenge of attempting to pictorialise it.

We need the arts to help us get our initiative into the two domains where it can make greatest impact – the home and the school. How to get awareness of the language crisis into the home? I know of only two ways of easily getting into people's homes: the Internet and the arts. The Internet is an important and still under-used resource for our theme, but it has its problems: it is still not available to a huge proportion of the human race; it can be slow and cumbersome, especially in downloading multimedia material; and those of us who do use the Internet routinely know how difficult it is to get a simple message across – or even noticed, within the floods of pages that exist. But the arts can get into the home every day in all kinds of mutually reinforcing ways – whether it be via a radio or television programme, a CD or DVD, a computer game, a calendar, a wall decoration or painting or photograph, a novel, a postcard, or a text-message poem (currently one of the coolest of artistic mediums among the young). There are so many opportunities, and so few have yet been exploited. We need to exploit them – and at all levels, including the most mundane. Where are the birthday cards related to language diversity? Where are the calendars? Charity, an English proverb says, begins at home. We must adapt that. It should be: Diversity begins at home. A splendid example of what can be done is the material produced by the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies at the University of Southampton – including a beautiful calendar, 'Why study languages?'⁴

I was writing the first draft of this paper just after Christmas, and I looked around me at the things which had come into my home at that time. One of the most noticeable arrivals were the Christmas cards. I looked at the ones we had received. Several were bilingual or multilingual, but the languages were all healthy languages, full of *joyeux noels* and *fröhliche weinachtens*. Why is there no Christmas card in which last speakers wish us happy holidays, in their languages, possibly for the last time? Why have I never seen a card wishing me happiness in Aramaic, the language of

Jesus and his disciples, a language which is so near to extinction in the present-day Middle East that, if he were to return using his mother-tongue, he would soon find no-one able to understand him? Let me leave Christmas behind. Why have I never seen an artistic oeuvre in which we see portrayed, for example, the communication gap between grandparent and grandchild, or any of the other striking images which characterise this field?

And the school? Here we need to get the issue into the curricula, and into routine classroom experience. I mean by this that it should be an obligatory part of the school curriculum to deal with language diversity, and that it should be a regular topic considered in school assemblies, open-days, exhibitions, and suchlike. Art projects can help here too. I have seen a whole art exhibition by children on the theme of wildlife extinction. It made front-page news in our local paper. Why not an exhibition on language extinction? The subject-matter of language is making some progress in schools. In this country, the English Language A-Level exam contains a great deal on language change, diversity, and endangerment. But age 16 is too late; awareness of the biological crisis is in schools at age seven. It should be the same with language. It is not too abstract a subject. I have heard seven-year-olds debating the language crisis, thanks to a skilled presentation by their teacher. All teachers should be doing this, and we need to be helping them, by providing materials and examples of excellence in practice. We are used to writing about language diversity for adults. How many of us have ever written on language diversity for children? The role of children to any ecolinguist is patently obvious: they are the parents of the next generation, so the sociolinguistic reality of the inter-generational transmission of language depends primarily on them. If they can be enthused about their native languages and language diversity, or have their enthusiasm maintained, we can be optimistic about any scenario for diversity and sustainability. By providing opportunities for language-specific chatrooms, making available multilingual websites, and doing all the things that the Internet enables us to do, we can make considerable progress.

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I would like to conclude this paper by making three recommendations. First, bodies interested in language diversity should commission an artwork of some kind to symbolise its content, or perhaps mount a competition. It would, in its recorded form – whether on paper or electronic – be a permanent reminder to their members as well as a means of spreading the message to others. I have discussed the kinds of artwork that might be envisaged, so I say no more about this point now.

Secondly, there needs to be a major award for language. Whether we like it or not, we live in an age of competitions and awards, and these produce some of the most watched programmes on television. Who is not aware of this year's Oscar nominations? Who in our newly extended Europe does not know of the Eurovision Song Contest? Not only are there Oscars, there are Grammys, Emmies, Golden Globes, Bookers, Pulitzers, Goncourts, ... We seem to be obsessed with

⁴ <http://www.whystudylanguages.ac.uk/calendar2011>

awards, but they work. The annual award of the Turner prize in Britain, in its often controversial decisions, has generated an extraordinary amount of discussion about the nature of visual art. The point hardly needs labouring, so let me make it briefly. I have already made it at UNESCO, but if an idea is worth saying it is worth saying twice, so let me repeat it. There needs to be an annual prize for artistic achievement in relation to language diversity, at Nobel level, to be announced perhaps on World Language Day (26 September). Let there be something, anything, concrete, to focus public attention on the language crisis. A dimension of this kind, I believe, would complement our professional linguistic activities, and ultimately aid them, for public awareness and sympathy is prerequisite if we are to alter the intellectual, emotional, and financial climate within which we have to work.

Thirdly, we need a physical location. If you are visiting London (or many another major city), and you are interested in science, where might you go, to follow-up your interest? The Science Museum, at least. And if you are interested in Natural History? The Natural History Museum? And art? The Tate Gallery. And Shakespeare? Shakespeare's Globe. But there is no language 'space' – no Language Museum, or Gallery, or whatever you would like to call it. There is no space where people can go to see how language works, how it is used, and how languages evolve; no space where they can see presented the world's linguistic variety; no public place where they can meet like-minded people and reflect on language diversity, sustainability, and peace.

A proposal for such a space, called World of Language, was promoted during the late 1990s in the UK. This would have been a multi-storey building, the first of its kind, with floors devoted to the world of speech, the world of writing, the world of meaning, the world of languages, and the world of language study. A building had even been identified, in Southwark, right next to Shakespeare's Globe. The plans had reached an advanced stage, with the support of the British

Council, and all that was required was a small tranche of government funding (£20 million) to get the project off the ground. Things were looking promising. But then the government had a better idea. It was called the Millennium Dome. The money which was wasted on the Dome project would have supported 20 'worlds of language'.

The world needs houses of language for the same reason that it needs expositions of all kinds, from the arts to natural history – to satisfy our insatiable curiosity about who we are, as members of the human race, where we have come from, and where we are going, and to demonstrate that we, as individuals and as communities, can make a difference to life on this planet. We expect, in a major city, that there will be a museum or gallery or other centre which will inform us about the main fields of human knowledge and creativity – to show us what others have done before us and to suggest directions where we can stand on shoulders and see new ways forward. Most of these fields, indeed, now have their expositions. But language, for some reason, has been seriously neglected – until now. Barcelona opens its Casa de les Llengües next year. In the USA, there is a National Museum of Language. Last month I heard of a proposal to establish one in Paris. In the UK, so far, there is nothing. And my final recommendation is that somehow, somewhere, somebody creates one.

Note:

This paper is a revisiting of my UNESCO keynote of 2003, incorporating material from papers delivered at Barcelona to Linguapax in 2004, at Reykjavik to the Dialogue of Cultures forum in 2005, and again at Barcelona to a UNESCOCat forum in 2007.

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