Multilingualism for Cultural Diversity and Participation for All in Cyberspace

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Session 3: Measuring and Monitoring Language Diversity

UNESCO Activities for the Safeguarding of Endangered languages

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1 THE UN context

In recent years, several international normative texts and declarations have testified to a growing awareness of the importance of language issues at the global level. However; linguistic rights of groups were never established in a binding way in an international legal instrument developen within the UN system.

Examples include:

(i) the Declaration of Vienna of the World Conference on Human Rights (1993), affirming the right for “persons belonging to minorities to use their own language” (art. 19);

(ii) the call of the General Assembly of the United Nations for more attention to multilingualism (December 1999);

(iii) resolution 56/262 (Part II) of the General Assembly of the United Nations focusing on the preservation and protection of all languages; and

(iv) the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations at its fifty-eighth session (2003), on measures to protect, promote and preserve all languages.

Moreover, linguistic diversity and its promotion are emphasized in the Declaration of Principles approved by the “World Summit on the Information Society (paras. 52 and 53) in Geneva in December 2003.

2 The UNESCO context

Recognizing the need for an integrated vision of the issue of language in all aspects that relate to UNESCO’s mandate, the Organization, in recent times, has paid due attention to language issues while developing such normative tools as the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and its Action Plan, adopted in 2001, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Recommendation on the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace; the latter two documents were adopted by the UNESCO’s General Conference in October 2003.
3  The Universal Declaration

The first of these three UNESCO documents, the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*, acknowledges the relationship between cultural diversity and linguistic diversity while also stating that cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. Its action plan recommends that Member States, in cooperation with speaker communities, undertake steps to:

1. sustain linguistic diversity and give support to expression, creation and dissemination in the greatest possible number of languages;
2. encourage linguistic diversity at all levels of education, and to foster the learning of several languages from the youngest age;
3. incorporate traditional pedagogies into the education process with a view to preserving and making full use of culturally appropriate methods of communication and transmission of knowledge;
4. encourage universal access to information in the public domain through the global network, including the promotion of linguistic diversity in cyberspace.

4  The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

The 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* aims, among other things, at safeguarding language as “a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage”, i.e. it recognizes the crucial role of languages for the expression and the intergenerational transmission of elements of our living heritage. Some of the domains of this heritage, such as oral expressions and traditions, are totally dependent on language. Safeguarding measures for language related topics may be expected to be put in place under this Convention. This Convention, the first binding international instrument of its kind, probably will enter into force in summer 2006. It will focus on endangered elements of the intangible cultural heritage; documentation and accessible archiving are among the measures advocated by the new Convention. We are in contact with the Korean authorities who envisage to establish a centre for developing documentation and archiving approaches using modern technologies; including the world wide web.
Recommendation on the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace

By adopting the Recommendation on the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace, UNESCO’s General Conference in 2003 recognized the importance of promoting multilingualism and equitable access to information and knowledge, especially in the public domain, and reiterated its conviction that UNESCO should have a leading role in encouraging access to information for all, multilingualism and cultural diversity on the global information networks. In various documents and programmes UNESCO has stressed the importance of multilingualism and the need to introduce and promote it in and through education.

UNESCO’s incentives (no cultural diversity without linguistic diversity)

UNESCO’s activities for the promotion of linguistic diversity, of safeguarding endangered languages and of multilingualism, are rooted in the acknowledgement that languages are not just indispensable tools of communication, or vectors of culture and filters of worldviews and values, but also essential constituents of the self-consciousness and identity of individuals and societies. Cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, Education For All, and inclusive knowledge societies, which are all promoted by UNESCO, cannot but fail without appropriate commitment of all stakeholders to promote languages, including mother tongues and endangered languages, and multilingualism.

Multilingualism is to be furthered not only for the sake of intercultural dialogue and cooperation; but also for creating conditions for speakers of non-dominant languages to fully participate in community and in national life:

UNESCO is convinced that the extinction of each and every language means an irrecoverable loss. UNESCO cares because:

- humanity developed and needs diversity,
- languages reflect past experiences,
- languages are tools for socialising and for expressing and transmitting social and cultural practices,
- languages contribute to human knowledge; they are also repositories of traditional knowledge which may mean that their study and safeguarding can be of direct importance for understanding and managing biodiversity.
- languages are amazingly rich and diverse products of the creativity of the human mind,
- languages attribute and confirm identity and are precious to their speakers.

7 UNESCO’s activities on endangered languages

Activities with regard to promotion of multilingualism are carried out all relevant UNESCO Sectors (Education, Communication, Culture and Social and Human Sciences) and in various intersectoral projects. In this presentation I will focus on UNESCO’s activities for the safeguarding of endangered languages.

The Endangered languages programme is one of the activities of the section of intangible cultural heritage of UNESCO’s sector for Culture. Three priority lines of action have been identified for the programme:

(i) awareness-raising of language endangerment, and of the need to safeguard our linguistic diversity

An example of the awareness-raising actions is the partnership between UNESCO, UN Works and Discovery Communications, INC. A series of 20 short-form programmes on various endangered languages throughout the world has been produced and is broadcast to over 100 million viewers internationally on Discovery Channel.

Another example is the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing (1996, 2001) which aroused vivid interest among scholars and journalists, and became a reference book for the general public.). The Atlas makes extensively use and will continue to do so of materials that were collected under the Japanese-Finnish-UNESCO programme UNESCO Red Book of Endangered Languages.

The main line of action “Enhancing the linkages between biological and cultural diversity as a key basis for sustainable development”, which involves the Natural Sciences Sector and the Culture Sector of UNESCO, pays due attention to studying the relevance of linguistic diversity for the transmission of traditional knowledge and the preservation of biological diversity.

(ii) local capacity-building and promotion of language policies and

Several forums organized by UNESCO in the 1990s addressed capacity-building and promotion of language policies in the Member States (with a focus on Africa). For example, the intergovernmental conference on language policies in Africa held in Harare in 1997, with a special focus on indigenous languages and multilingualism. In 2004, the initiative “Language documentation and preservation in Sub-Saharan Africa: assessment and promotion of co-operation and capacity-building” has been launched. Capacity-building and promotion of language policies: in the current biennium (2004/2005), 14 national and sub-regional capacity-building projects have been decentralized to UNESCO field offices throughout the world (with a special
focus on Africa and Asia/Pacific) and 5 pilot projects are directly implemented by local NGOs and researchers.

(iii) mobilization of international cooperation.

In March 2003, UNESCO brought together experts from all over the world to enhance the Organization’s action in the field of endangered languages. The goal was to define and reinforce UNESCO’s role in supporting the world’s endangered languages. The meeting aimed at establishing criteria to assess language endangerment, reviewing the state of languages in various regions of the world, proposing to UNESCO’s Director-General mechanisms and strategies to safeguard endangered languages and to maintain and promote linguistic and cultural diversity.

We are at present developing a new line of activities aiming at the safeguarding of aspects of language that are especially relevant for their function as vehicles of the ICH

**9 Assessing Language endangerment**

The 2003 meeting resulted in the acceptance of recommendations to UNESCO and of a document called ‘Language Vitality and Endangerment’. This document is designed to indicate ways how to enhance the vitality of threatened languages. It identifies nine factors for determining the level of endangerment of languages.

For each factor, a score can be given varying from 5, meaning *safe*, till zero, meaning *extinct* (4: unsafe, 3: definitely endangered, 2: severely endangered, 1; critically endangered). This 6-level system is the last in a large number of similar attempts at classification.

The nine factors can be divided into three sub-groups: the first six factors evaluate language vitality, two more assessing language attitudes and the last one evaluating the availability of documentation.

1. **Intergenerational language transmission**

   Whether or not a language is being transmitted from one generation to the next is the most commonly used factor in evaluating the vitality of a language.

2. **absolute number of speakers**

   A small ethno-linguistic community may more readily disappear due to disease, warfare, or natural disaster than a larger one. It may also easily merge with a larger neighboring group, giving up its own language and culture.

3. **Proportion of speakers within the total population**

   The number of speakers of the ancestral language in relation to the total population of an ethno-linguistic group is a significant indicator of language vitality.

4. **Shifts in domains of language use**
Who speaks with whom where about what and what are the trends?

5. **Response to new domains and media**
While some language communities do succeed in introducing their language into new emerging areas of language use, most do not. If the language of a community does not meet the challenges of modernity, it becomes increasingly irrelevant and stigmatized; also in the eyes of the speakers themselves.

6. **Curriculum materials for education and literacy**
Education in the language is essential for language vitality, literacy being linked with social and economic development. Books and materials are needed on all topics and for various age groups and language levels.

7. **Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies including official status and use**
The language policies of a state may encourage linguistic minorities to maintain their language, or may force them to abandon it. Governmental and institutional attitudes towards languages are a powerful force both for promotion and loss of languages.

8. **Community members’ attitudes towards their language**
People usually are attached to, or even proud of their language; then they will wish to transmit and promote it. They may also be ashamed of it and, therefore, not promote it; or they may even see it as a liability and actively avoid using it.

9. **Amount and quality of documentation about the language**
A fair amount of documentation and publications about a language is helpful for standardizing a language and for help it meet the requirements of modernity.

The nine factors can be used to assess the language situation and to determine whether action is in order, and if so, what to do first. The experts warned that the tool they propose for measuring language endangerment cannot be applied blindly and that they are best used in combination. A language that is ranked highly according to one criterion may deserve immediate and urgent attention on account of other factors. The factors are offered as guidelines only. Users should adapt them to the local context and to the specific purpose sought.

Two elements in our programme mentioned so far may be helpful for measuring and monitoring, that is the on-line Atlas of Endangered Languages an ongoing exercise that eventually will cover all regions of the World, and the language vitality factors, many or all of which might be processed into more or less objective indicators. However, various caveats are in order and in the rest of this paper I will concentrate on the problems of counting and measuring
in the field of culture, cultures and languages.

10 Counting cultures

People like counting. But, you cannot count everything. Take cultures: no one can tell you how many cultures there are, or – for that matter – how many civilisations.

First of all, there are quite divergent definitions of culture and these forcibly have their repercussions for what is understood by a culture. A culture, that is a living culture, is carried by a community. Adhering to a broad definition of culture, we might wish to say that the culture of a community is a set of generally shared cultural and social features that is shared by its members; some of these co-existing features are characteristic for that community, others may be less characteristic for the identity of its members. Language often belongs to these features, while being at the same time the main tool for their expression and transmission.

11 Counting cultural communities

Counting cultural communities seems slightly easier than counting cultures; however, persons and also groups of persons can belong to more than one cultural community, and, in fact, no two persons or groups of persons share exactly the same set of cultural features. A further, no less disturbing factor is that cultures are in constant evolution and that they do not evolve in isolation, but influencing each other. So, the exchange and adaptation of cultural features, which may lead to phenomena such as merger or split of cultures, or, let’s say, of cultural communities, have been constant elements in the development of humanity, and this, too, makes that one cannot speak about a stable number of cultures, or about a stable number of communities.

12 Counting languages

Languages, and ethno-linguistic communities, are easier to count, though here, too, as you know, things are not all that easy. The experts behind the *Ethnologue*, a catalogue of all languages of the world which is prepared and kept up to date by the *Summer Institute of Linguistics*, claim that there still are some 6,912 languages spoken today - *still* because there are claims that that number must have been far higher a considerable time, let’s say 3,000 years ago. Both in Brazil and in Australia, for instance, the number of indigenous languages nowadays is
less than a quarter of the figure of only a few centuries ago. The *Ethnologue* claims that 516 of today’s almost seven thousand languages are nearly extinct.

We may not know the exact number of languages – some linguists keep the number at six rather than at seven thousand –, but what we do know is that our linguistic diversity is eroding at a fast rate and that that is not just a question of a diminishing numbers of languages. The numbers usually do not distinguish between languages with full-fledged status and languages the use of which is very limited. Another factor that diminishes our linguistic diversity is the homogenisation of many, especially dominant languages which leads to the fading away of dialectal and other variation within languages.

The estimations as to the pace of language extinction, all of them by serious experts, differ greatly: Michael Kraus, from the *Alaska Native Language Center*, predicted in 1992 that within a century 90% of the present-day languages will have disappeared, whereas David Crystal in 2000 speaks about half of today’s languages disappearing in our century, and about a serious chance that the world will be left with just a single language in a few centuries (Crystal 2000: 165), which – he says – will be the greatest intellectual disaster the planet has ever known.

13 Correspondence culture/language

Although for many cultural communities an ancestral language is a crucial element among the features that are distinctive for their identity, there is no one-to-one correspondence between cultures and languages.

There are communities that, according to linguists, share the same language but that nevertheless feel quite distinct. In opposite cases, one finds language forms that are so divergent as to be mutually unintelligible, which nonetheless are considered by their speakers as belonging to one and the same language. In such cases shared experiences, whether or not invented, a shared view of the world, a strongly unifying national or regional culture or, – as in the case of Chinese – a shared writing system, and/or other cultural or social features, are strong enough to unify.

Studies by linguists cannot be decisive here. Historical arguments, political decisions, important distinctive or shared features of communities; all will all have their say. Safest of all is to ask the communities; but, what they claim will not always be a basis for decisions by policy makers, nor is there always a single view within the community.
14 Unstable numbers

Languages, like cultures, are in constant evolution; languages, too may merge and single languages may split into two or more languages.

Languages may disappear slowly - just eroding. It then may happen that fewer and fewer people within a community will be able to communicate in their ancestral language, about fewer and fewer subjects, and less and less fluently – another language taking over. The ancestral language, as a rule, will be transmitted to fewer and fewer children, ending up as a language spoken by an ageing and ever diminishing group of people. Cultural and linguistic assimilation may be slow processes, with intermediate phases of bi- and multilingualism, that do not necessarily seriously traumatising groups or individuals. (let’s not forget that language merger, loss and split all are natural phenomena)

Languages, however, may also merge or disappear fast, due to war-fare or other man- or nature-inflicted disasters, or – as is the case in large numbers of states everywhere in the world - to the absence of policies and measures that would allow them to live up to the requirements of modernization.

Nation building, and centralising tendencies in states – such as the introduction of general education, military service or nation-wide broadcasting systems, and the intensification of phenomena that are commonly referred to by the term of globalization, have seen to it that during the last few centuries – and at an ever increasing pace – processes of acculturalisation and assimilation are imposed in such a way (at short notice, without leaving a choice, or without providing the possibility to adapt gradually to new circumstances) that people and groups cannot but experience the erosion or disappearance of their mother tongue as a deep personal loss, as an assault of an important part of their identity.

The difficulty whether to attribute more or less similar language forms to one or more languages, the incidental “discovery” of a new language and the evolving character of languages makes that there is no stable number of languages and that numbers of languages that are presented to us are estimations. Furthermore, numerous groups and uncountable numbers of individuals have multilingual backgrounds and are able to function fluently in different linguistic communities, which adds to the problem of establishing numbers of speakers of individual languages.

15 Conclusion

Through its programmes on endangered languages UNESCO wishes to contribute to the safeguarding and transmission of linguistic diversity and of cultural diversity, in particular of
the diversity of our living or intangible heritage, which depends to a large extent for its expression and transmission on orality. Not all languages can be saved and that does not seem necessary either; actions only make sense if in the communities concerned there is a wide support for revitalization for reinforcing or modernisation of their languages.

For languages to survive in modernity, it is not an easy challenge: the language has to be used in a large number of relevant domains, for instance in the media, in public space and, indeed, in cyberspace; it also has to be highly thought of by its speakers. For this to be possible, apart from cooperating authorities and adequate funding; good and extensive descriptions of languages are necessary - including grammatical and dictionary - and, in addition to that, other things, such as, for instance, the selection or creation of a standard form of the language, a standardized writing system and the development of teaching materials and the collection and publication of literary and other texts.

If we want to make a difference and if we want to be able to measure the impact of the implementation of language policies and planning activities, we need figures, not just about numbers of languages and speakers, but also about the status, corpus and acquisition of languages. UNESCO’s Culture sector will be happy to continue contributing - cooperating within and outside UNESCO - to the development of detailed indicators that will allow us to measure and monitor the developments of languages, especially of endangered languages.