Expert Meeting on Current Trends in Linguistic Mapping

in preparation of the third edition of the

Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing

29-30 November 2007, UNESCO Headquarters, Paris

This Expert Meeting on Current Trends in Linguistic Mapping is held to support the preparation of the third edition of the Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing. The meeting is organized and hosted by UNESCO within the framework of its activities under the Endangered Languages Programme and the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Experts are invited to discuss current trends and innovations in linguistic cartography. This will include discussions of recent experiences and projects in language mapping in various parts of the world, particularly any such projects as have focused on endangered languages but also including others focused on language distribution, dialectology, diachronic mapping, genetic relations or other subjects.

With the increasing availability and sophistication of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and the growing interest in endangered languages, the third edition of UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing must take advantage of the best knowledge and experience available among linguistic cartographers active in the field. The purpose of the meeting is to consider a number of recent and current language mapping efforts, explore methodological issues of state-of-the-art linguistic cartography relevant to the Atlas publication and identify potential experts who might contribute to the revision of the Atlas.

The Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing: Purpose and goal

The central purpose and goal of the Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing are to raise awareness in the international and academic community, mass media and the general public regarding the issue of language endangerment and the need to safeguard the world’s linguistic diversity, by presenting visually the current status of the world’s languages in danger of disappearing. Such awareness-raising constitutes one of the main action lines of the UNESCO Endangered Languages Programme. Attention to endangered languages is also central to the 2003 ‘Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage’, which recognizes the crucial role of languages in the expression and transmission of living heritage and encourages safeguarding language as "a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage". Further, at its 176th session in April 2007, UNESCO’s Executive Board decided to explore “a possible international standard-setting instrument for the protection of indigenous and endangered languages” (176 EX/Decision 59) and to study UNESCO’s recent activities in this domain. Should such an international standard-setting instrument be developed, it will doubtlessly call for increased global awareness of the importance of safeguarding endangered languages, a need addressed by the Atlas.
The Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing: History and development

In 1996, with financial support from the UNESCO/Japan Funds-in-Trust, the first edition of the Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing, edited by the late Stephen Wurm, was published by UNESCO Publishing (Paris) and Pacific Linguistics (Australia). This first edition comprised 53 pages total, including 12 pages of maps, and appeared in three language editions (English, French, and Spanish). The first publication of its kind, the Atlas met with vivid scholarly and journalistic interest and soon became a general reference book for the wider public. As a result, the English version sold out quickly.

A second, thoroughly updated English edition of the Atlas was commissioned by UNESCO in 1999 and appeared in 2001, again edited by Stephen Wurm, and expanded to 90 pages including 14 pages of maps. The update reflected the fact that since 1996 and the first edition of the Atlas, research on endangered languages and scientific interest and work in the field had proliferated. The second edition of the Atlas lists, region by region, some 800 endangered languages, and again attracted much academic, media and public attention. To this day, UNESCO receives regular feedback from speaker communities, and hundreds of press articles in different parts of the world have been devoted to the Atlas, underlining its impact as an awareness-raising instrument regarding language endangerment.

After the two paper versions of the UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing had appeared, it was envisioned to make the information collected available online as part of the UNESCO Initiative B@bel. The first part of the Online Atlas was prepared in 2002-2003, comprising a clickable map of the African continent and entries on the 100 endangered African languages mentioned in the print Atlas (see http://www.unesco.org/culture/en/endangeredlanguages/atlas). Work on the European map for this online edition of the Atlas has been almost completed; for the moment, however, the online edition has been put on hold in favor of a thoroughly revised third print edition.

The necessity for a revised print edition arises from the fact that expertise and knowledge in the study of linguistic diversity and language endangerment have grown since the second edition appeared. UNESCO’s own engagement and role as a standard-setting institution in the field have evolved significantly on the basis of a 2003 international expert meeting that formulated concrete proposals for activities for the safeguarding of endangered languages and established a ‘Language Vitality and Endangerment’ framework to create a standardized definition and assessment of language endangerment. There arises a need to integrate such recent developments into the third edition of the Atlas, as well as to update methodology and presentation on the basis of ongoing technological advancement and innovation in the area of linguistic cartography.

Goals of the meeting:

The present expert meeting has been called in order to explore possible avenues to take with the third thoroughly revised and updated edition of the Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing in terms of methodology of linguistic mapping and presentation of data. Through case-study presentations of a number of recent and current language mapping efforts, experts will explore methodological issues of state-of-the-art linguistic cartography.
relevant to the *Atlas* publication, pointing towards best practices, comparing commonly encountered obstacles and sharing solutions they have devised.

In addition, UNESCO will present its recent and ongoing initiatives in devising a Language Endangerment and Linguistic Diversity Indicator and will ask experts to review a related draft data collection instrument that is to be used for updating the *Atlas*. Through the meeting and parallel activities, UNESCO will identify potential experts who might contribute to the revision of the *Atlas* either as cartographers, linguists or both.

The expected outcome of the meeting will be a fuller understanding at UNESCO of the options available for the re-edition of the *Atlas* in terms of mapping methodologies and data presentation, as put forward by the experts and reflecting the state-of-the-art of linguistic cartography. Further, based on feedback from the experts, a draft data collection instrument for the *Atlas* will be finalized. In addition, suggestions for strategizing the workflow between editors (collectors of data) and cartographer(s) (presenter/s of data) could be outlined, in view of making the cartographer’s perspective in this regard available to a future Board of Editors.

**Discussion points:**

As stated above, discussion at the meeting will be based on case-study reports provided by the invited experts, on the basis of which the current state-of-the-art of linguistic cartography will be explored and assessed, particularly in terms of approaches and techniques used but also common problem areas and existing innovative solutions.

A second basis for discussion will be the current second edition of the *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing* and the relevant issues, problems and areas for improvement with regards to the third edition. These include the following:

- **Display of world regions:** The two previous editions of the *Atlas* do not cover all areas of the world. The maps are furthermore widely divergent in scale and scope. As the new edition of the *Atlas* is to cover the whole world, a provisional schema for segmenting the globe into regional maps will be presented to the experts for discussion and feedback.

- **Level of geographic detail:** The second edition of the *Atlas* includes fairly little topographic detail (only the main rivers and major settlements are represented) and only the most basic geo-political detail (country boundaries). No further topographic information (e.g. plains, lowlands, deserts, mountains) is included. Experts will be asked to advise on the level of topographic and geo-political detail to be represented in the new edition, taking into account considerations of visualization, orientation, feasibility, and readability.

- **Locating languages:** The placement of languages and linguistic borders in the second edition is fairly approximate and not based on precise cartographic measurement. Experts will be asked to advise on state-of-the-art methods of cartography, specifically regarding the use of GIS technology, and addressing particularly the problems of whether endangered languages should best be located as “points” or as “areas” in the *Atlas*.

- **Complementarity of print atlas and digital atlas:** Although priority is given in the short term to publishing a third print edition of the *Atlas*, data collection must be conceived with an eye toward possible on-line access to a future interactive atlas. Experts’ experiences in
print and interactive presentations can contribute to UNESCO’s long term planning of a possible on-line resource.

- **Methodological/comparative chapter to be included in the third edition:** Previous editions necessarily included regional maps that proceeded from different premises and levels of knowledge. The third edition will seek to standardize the maps that serve as the core of the *Atlas*, but will also include a prefatory chapter that illustrates different approaches to linguistic cartography, offering a showcase for innovative approaches that might include some of those presented at the expert meeting as case studies. For example, different levels of linguistic and socio-cultural detail could be visualized here, as well as diachronic (time-series) data, issues of internal linguistic diversity and boundary-drawing, or historical patterns of language extinction.

**Procedure of the meeting:**

[Draft agenda for Thursday November 29th & Friday November 30th]

**Thursday, November 29th, 2007**
- Opening
- Introduction and objectives of the meeting
- Short self-presentation of experts invited
- First round of case study presentations

Lunch Break

- Continuation of case study presentations
- Review and summary by a discussant
- Plenary discussion: state-of-the-art of linguistic cartography

**Friday, November 30th, 2007**
- Continuation of plenary discussion: state-of-the-art of linguistic cartography
- Plenary discussion: issues of linguistic mapping relevant to the UNESCO *Atlas*

Lunch Break

- Continuation of the plenary discussion: issues of linguistic mapping relevant to the UNESCO *Atlas*
- Summary and closure of the meeting