



Safeguarding of Endangered Languages

Report on the project of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Section of UNESCO

by **Arienne Dwyer, Matthias Brenzinger, and Akira Y. Yamamoto**

Recent History

UNESCO's involvement in endangered languages is very recent, but has its roots in initiatives of the last two decades. In the 1980s UNESCO began to make statements on the importance of languages in the maintenance of cultural diversity of the world. Under the leadership of the late Stephen Wurm, UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Section (ICHS) launched the Red Book of Languages in Danger of Disappearing Program. Though UNESCO undertook a new project "Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" in 1997, language was not included. Only in September 2001, at the International Jury for the Proclamation of Masterpieces (Elche, Spain), was it recommended that UNESCO establish an endangered languages program separate from the Masterpieces Project. In the same year, UNESCO's 31st Session of the General Conference issued the "Action Plan of the Universal Declaration of the Cultural Diversity," highlighting the importance of languages.

At the second International Conference on Endangered Languages (Nov 30 – December 2 2001 in Kyoto as part of the Endangered Languages of the Pacific Rim Project), it became clear that UNESCO and endangered-language advocates share the same goal: the maintenance and perpetuation of language diversity. At the conference, Madame Aikawa (then the Head of ICHS), Michael Krauss, Osahito Miyaoka, Osamu Sakiyama, and Akira Yamamoto agreed that it was high time to initiate a call for coordination and cooperation of indigenous-language advocates, linguists, and their respective organizations.

UNESCO's Constitution states as its basic principle "to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world without distinction of race, sex, language, religion, by the Charter of the United Nations" (UNESCO Constitution Article 1). Madame Aikawa states that "based on this principle, UNESCO has developed

programs aimed at promoting languages as instruments of education and culture, and as significant means through which to participate in national life" (2001: 13).

The stated four-fold purpose of the earlier Red Book Program still holds for the currently-developing partnerships between language advocates and UNESCO in 2003

1. to continue gathering information on endangered languages (including their status, the degree of urgency for undertaking research),
2. to strengthen research and the collection of materials relating to endangered languages, for which little or no such activities had been undertaken to date, and which belong to a specific category such as language isolates, languages of special interest for typological and historical-comparative linguistics, and are in imminent danger of extinction,
3. to undertake activities aiming to establish a worldwide project committee, and a network of regional centers as focal points for large areas on the basis of existing contacts, and
4. to encourage publication of materials and the results of studies on endangered languages.

2003 Documents

UNESCO has begun a new phase to safeguard endangered languages under the leadership of Dr. Rieks Smeets who assumed the headship of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Section in May 2003. Between November 2001 and March 2003, a group of linguists and language advocates worked in collaboration with UNESCO to formulate ways to assess language vitality, and produced a set of guidelines in a document entitled "Language Vitality and Endangerment." A second document was also produced: a series of action-plan recommendations addressing the role of language communities, linguists, language advocates, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and UNESCO.

One crucial point we emphasize in these documents is for all stakeholders to work with the endangered language communities toward revitalization, maintenance, and perpetuation of their heritage languages. We believe that any work in endangered language communities must be reciprocal and collaborative.

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UNESCO organized an International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Program "Safeguarding of the Endangered Languages" (March 10-12, 2003; see <www.unesco.org/culture/heritage/intangible/meetings/paris_march2003.shtml#_ftn2>). The goal of the meeting was to define and reinforce UNESCO's role in safeguarding the world's endangered languages, and participants included members of endangered language communities, linguists, and NGOs. Specifically, the meeting was (1) to formulate a clear definition of endangered languages and a set of criteria for assessing language endangerment (resulting in the document *Language Vitality and Endangerment*), (2) to review the state of languages in various regions of the world (to be published by UNESCO later this year), (3) to define the role of UNESCO, and (4) to propose to UNESCO's Director-General concrete action plans regarding mechanisms and strategies to safeguard endangered languages, maintain and promote linguistic and cultural diversity of the world.

Language Vitality and Endangerment (approved March 12, 2003): a summary

To enhance the vitality of threatened languages, there is an imperative need for language documentation, new materials, trained local linguists, trained language teachers, new policy initiatives, raising public awareness, and support at all levels, from individual language specialists to NGOs, from local governments to international institutions such as UNESCO. In the end, it is the community people, not outsiders, who maintain or abandon their language: it is their choice if and how to revitalize, maintain, and fortify their language.

When speaker communities ask for support to reinforce their threatened languages, language specialists should and must make their skills available to these communities, in planning, implementation, evaluation, and retooling. In short, language specialists should be involved at all points in their language vitalization process.

What can be done to safeguard endangered languages? In order to meet the needs of the speaker community, we need to have a clear understanding of the language situation of the community. Thus, nine major factors are proposed to assess the language situations. These factors and their descriptions are offered as guidelines and none of these factors should be used alone.

A. Assessing Language Vitality and State of Endangerment

Factor 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission

The language is being transmitted from one generation to the next. The more transmission occurs from one generation to the next, the stronger the language is.

Factor 2: Absolute Number of Speakers

A small population is much more vulnerable than a larger one to decimation by disease, warfare, natural disaster, or by merger with a larger group. The more cohesive a community's identity, the stronger the language.

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Factor 3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

The number of speakers in relation to the total population of a group is a significant indicator of language vitality. The greater the number of people using the language, the stronger the language.

Factor 4: Loss of Existing Language Domains

Where and with whom is the language used, and for what range of topics is it used? The more consistently and persistently the language is used, the stronger the language is. This means that the language is used in every aspect of life of the community.

Factor 5: Response to New Domains and Media

As community living conditions change, does the language go with changes? The more actively the language is used in new domains, the stronger the language is. The new domains include schools, new work environments, and new media, including broadcast media and the Internet.

Factor 6: Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Is education conducted in the language with materials in oral, written and other media forms? The greater the varieties of materials existing in the language, and the more they are used for education, the stronger the language is.

B. Language Attitudes and Policies: the dominant group's or the neighboring group's attitudes toward languages affect the maintenance or abandonment of the language of the ethnolinguistic community.

Factor 7: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, including Official Status & Use

Governments and institutions have explicit policies and/or implicit attitudes toward the dominant and subordinate languages. The more positive the official attitudes and policies are toward the language of the community, the stronger the language is.

Factor 8: Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Languages

Members of a speech community may see their language as essential to their community and identity, and they promote it. The more positive their attitudes are and more pride they have in their language, the stronger the language is. The more value they attach to their traditions, the more likely the community's language is maintained and promoted.

C. Urgency of Documentation

The type and quality of existing language materials help: language community members formulate specific tasks, linguists design research projects together with members of the language community, and all concerned (including UNESCO) formulate ways to support documentation efforts.

Factor 9: Amount and Quality of Documentation

Is there an abundance of well-documented, transcribed, translated, and analyzed materials? The more historical and contemporary language materials there are, the stronger the language is. These include comprehensive grammars and dictionaries, extensive texts, constant flow of language materials, and abundant annotated high-quality audio and video recordings

Recommendations to Director-General: Action Plans

The importance of linguistic diversity is emphasized in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2 Nov2001) and in Points 5, 6 and 10 of the Action Plan accompanying this Declaration. [Note: The entire document is at: http://www.unesco.org/culture/heritage/intangible/endangeredlanguages/html_eng/RecomActionPlans.doc]:

Point 5. Safeguarding the linguistic heritage of humanity and giving support to expression, creation and dissemination in the greatest possible number of languages;

Point 6. Encouraging linguistic diversity – while respecting the mother tongue – at all levels of education, wherever possible, and fostering the learning of several languages from the youngest age;

Point 10. Promoting linguistic diversity in cyberspace and encouraging universal access through the global network to all information in the public domain;

At the conclusion of Paris meeting, these action points were submitted to the Director-General of UNESCO. The meeting participants requested the Director-General to:

1. Suggest to member states that they: **a.** Survey and profile those languages which are found to be endangered (bearing in mind the criteria in 3. above); **b.** Actively promote the recognition of endangered languages of their countries; **c.** Encourage the documentation of endangered languages; **d.** Create the conditions which facilitate the active use of and access to those languages, by, inter alia, assigning all relevant languages their rightful place in the educational system, media, and access to cyberspace, subject to the wishes of individual speech communities, respecting their commitments to linguistic human rights; **e.** Foster speech communities' pride in their own languages and cultures, as well as secure equal prestige for all languages of a state; **f.** Explore the economic and social benefits of linguistic and cultural diversity, as a stimulus for sustainable development; **g.** Also provide funding for documentation, revitalization, and strengthening programmes for endangered languages;

2. Establish a financial and administrative mechanism **a.** to support projects which document endangered languages, notably recording, collecting and publishing new materials, safeguarding existing archives and updating the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing; **b.** to initialize projects which strengthen and revitalize endangered languages, notably language training programmes which ensure intergenerational transmission; **c.** to produce and disseminate training manuals for community-based documentation, teaching, and curriculum development as well as creative work in endangered languages;

3. Enhance UNESCO's role as a centre for resources on language diversity and endangerment by **a.** Increasing public awareness of language endangerment through the media, the arts and public events; **b.** Establishing an international network linking organizations and communities, providing access to archives, research, teaching and training projects and materials, sources of funding, and reference materials, referring to best practices; **c.** Supporting regional

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centres that design, implement, and evaluate locally-appropriate programmes and resources through the building of local capacities for work on endangered languages; education; and the facilitation of the exchange of information and experiences between different indigenous groups and organizations; **d.** Coordinating among policy makers, experts and NGOs in order to explore the link between globalization and language extinction and look for systematic solutions on a global scale.

What Do All These Tell Us About Our Tasks?

The world faces new challenges in keeping its languages alive and well. It is time for the peoples of the world to pool their resources and to build on the strengths of their linguistic and cultural diversity. This entails pooling the resources of language specialists, speaker communities, NGOs, governmental organizations, and, of course, UNESCO

Other UNESCO Awareness Raising Activities

1. Discovery Communications (DCI) has produced nine two-minute vignettes of speakers of endangered languages. DCI will air up to 50 vignettes on DCI's networks. Each offers a snapshot of language as a means of communication and expression of culture and identity. [See <http://corporate.discovery.com/press/press_releases/030211r.html.]

2. A project called Voices of the World 2005 will make a 24-hour movie representing 2,800 individual languages that exemplify the world's diversity and transmitting a message of goodwill via speech, music, and moving images. Also planned is an audiovisual data bank, the "language

exploratorium" of comparative language materials, images, music - recordings and information. The advisory panel includes David Crystal and David Maybury-Lewis.

Where Do We Go From Here?

That UNESCO organized and hosted the 2003 Expert Meeting is a significant milestone for endangered-language advocacy: it has sanctioned international attention to the problem of maintaining language diversity. With this support, we can expect to see more attention in the coming years.

UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Section, under Dr. Smeets' able direction, is in the process of defining its role in safeguarding endangered languages. UNESCO is most likely to have a role in information dissemination. While many may have also wished for strong fiscal and administrative support, these functions do not generally fall within UNESCO's mandate. In the coming biennium, these are limited to the following two support mechanisms: The Director-General has allocated at least \$400,000 as a startup fund for general initiatives of the Endangered Language Program for 2004-2005. Dr. Smeets is also preparing to form an advisory group from UNESCO's six regions of the world.

The value of UNESCO's ability to disseminate information about language endangerment should not be underestimated. At the same time, the scope of the UNESCO Endangered Language Program is largely dependent on the active involvement of linguists and language advocates, that is, on our long-term active involvement.

Stay tuned as we find out how the plans materialize.