

# Endangered languages: Heritage of humanity in dire need of protection

Four approaches which support their preservation and maintenance

Lenguas en peligro: una herencia de la humanidad en gran necesidad de protección

Cuatro acercamientos para apoyar su preservación y mantenimiento

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present and discuss four approaches which support actions in favor of endangered language preservation and maintenance. Preservation, on the one hand, refers to the process of documenting and storing information which can later on be accessed by the public; whereas maintenance, on the other, implies a support for the users of the language to prevent its disappearance by encouraging its use. Each of the approaches is assessed on its priority in one or the other form of language protection, drawing on their justifications and main goals. Finally, conclusions are brought forth regarding the potential uses of the different approaches.

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## Key Words:

Endangered Languages, Documentation, Preservation, Maintenance, Heritage

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## Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es presentar y discutir cuatro aproximaciones que apoyan las acciones en favor de la preservación y mantenimiento de los idiomas en peligro de extinción. La preservación se entiende como el proceso de documentar y almacenar información que pueda ser posteriormente accesible por el público general, mientras que mantenimiento, por otro lado, implica el apoyo a los usuarios del idioma para prevenir la desaparición y promover la continuación de su uso. Cada una de las aproximaciones es evaluada con respecto a su prioridad como forma de proteger el idioma, obtenidas a partir de su justificación y objetivos. Por último, las conclusiones se presentan hacia su uso potencial de las distintas aproximaciones.

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## Palabras clave:

Idiomas en peligro de extinción, documentación, preservación, mantenimiento, herencia

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## Introduction

Whenever we think of the term 'language' it is directly associated with one or many countries, and it is further linked with a certain culture or cultural expression. It is also common to assume nation, language and culture to be the same.<sup>1</sup> When expecting to meet a German citizen, it is considered that his or her native language will be German, and not Turkish, Russian, Sorbian or East Frisian, even though all of these languages are spoken in the Federal Republic of Germany (among many others). In fact, all of the ones just mentioned count as minority languages in Germany, even though the first two are majority languages in other countries, and the last two, Sorbian and East Frisian, are not only spoken by a minority unique to Germany, but are threatened with disappearance (Wurm, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

There are many more languages in this world than there are countries. The estimates show over 6,000 languages (Maffi, 1999; Gordon, 2005), whereas the number of nations reaches only about 192 (UN, 2007). The 12 most spoken languages are practiced by more than half of the world population, while all the other languages account for the other half (e.g. New Guinea is home to over 1,000 languages, while Europe holds about 209 languages) (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). The most wide-spread languages are currently increasing in their number of speakers, making other languages disappear as the population shifts to the majority languages (Maffi, 1999; Tsunoda, 2001; Crystal, 2000). This effect leads to define the demise of languages with the word 'endangerment', the same term used to describe the extinction of species.

A language is considered to be endangered when the population of its speakers is diminishing, and the last generation does not exercise the use of the lan-

guage actively or even at all (Tsunoda, 2001). There are different stages of decay or disappearance from a healthy language, used in everyday life and passed on from generation to generation, to a language on the brink of extinction, holding on to one or a few elderly carriers.<sup>3</sup>

In order to address this demise, language activists, scholars and language communities at large, have engaged in efforts to prevent their total disappearance from the face of the earth. Different reasons to protect endangered languages have been brought forth in the discussion, leading to the four main approaches following. These approaches are in no way final, but they intend to provide a guideline into the main strands of argument that have been presented to address the issue of endangered language protection.

First approach: the aesthetic perspective

*"Although literature can be translated after a fashion, it can never be fully converted out of its own words. If this were so, all languages would carry the same feel and voltage and we know they do not."* (Ó Muircheartaigh, 1998, p. 202)

The great diversity in producing sounds and motions for purposes of communication encompassed by the various languages portrays the natural creativity of mankind. In spoken languages the movements of the tongue, combined with movements of the lips and inhalation or exhalation of air, produce a variety of sounds. Other languages, as is the case of sign languages for example, include kinds of non-verbal communication, such as gestures, pantomime, noises produced with hands or feet, etc., just to name a few. These numerous elements of communication can be appreciated as an end to themselves. The preservation of many languages based on their aesthetic content can be an argument worth bringing forth. Their loss implies the loss of unique pitches, facial

<sup>1</sup> In many cases it is political reasons and not linguistic ones, the ones which lead to determine the category of "language". See Nic Craith, M. (2003) and Dalby (2002) to name a few.

<sup>2</sup> The European Charter on Minority and Regional Languages (1992) has been officially acknowledged, introduced and observed in Germany since January 1st, 1999. Following the guidelines of this charter, Germany has determined to pursue a series of measures to protect the various minority languages found in its territory (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> This, though, is a very simplified way of looking at the problem. Wurm (2001) mentions the different degrees of endangerment based on this quantitative perspective. Crystal (2000), Dalby (2002) and many others, offer a more qualitative perspective, where the social domains, in which the language is used, are gauged to define how endangered a language truly is.

expressions, etc.; to prevent the disappearance of a language would save an artistic treasure.<sup>4</sup>

However, very few of the world's languages account for such creative genius. Active speakers do not conceive their language exclusively as means of entertainment for others, but as a system of communication in itself. To preserve it as an aesthetic pleasure would downplay the language as a collector's prize, ignoring its social implications. Its importance seems to depend exclusively on its appeal as an aesthetic paradigm. A language would no longer be regarded as a dynamic system, but as a museum exhibit. It might be worth preserving only to listen to it or see it again. Its contents and its users would thus be ultimately ignored.

Second approach: the linguistic value of the language

*"Why should people care about endangered languages? For linguistics and the sciences of mind and brain that encompass it, linguistic diversity shows us the scope and limits of the language instinct. Just think of the distorted picture we would have if only English were available for study!" (Pinker, 1994, p. 260)*

The more languages are studied, the more information is gathered about the use of language in general. The studies provide an insight into the way the brain works, the origins and history of languages, and create a framework for the prediction of future developments. Having the possibility to compare between languages gives a clearer picture of the array of options available and in use by the human collective to convey messages and meanings through language (Pinker, 1994).

Linguistics is the field of study concerned with this development. It analyses the structures which the language uses to express meaning for verbal (or in some cases, non-verbal) communication. This implies that all languages have a structure through which they organize the information to be communicated. Many of them share a certain grammar

<sup>4</sup> "Every language has its own window to the world. Every language is a living museum, a monument to every culture it has been a vehicle to". (Nettle & Romaine 2000:14).

or syntax, probably because of a common root (e.g. Romanic languages from Latin). Some others have special constructions, systems or layouts, and a level of endemism due to geographic or any other kind of isolation. Theories of common origins or other relations between languages can only be found through the recompilation of data. Language has to be collected from its sources, and the information needs to be processed, in order to find and understand its changing trends.

In this approach, documentation is again a key aspect.<sup>5</sup> Linguists and other scholars need to take the time to transcribe and analyze as many languages as possible, to ensure that the pool of comparable elements is large enough to draw reliable conclusions. An extensive documentation requires an immersion and participation inside a community. If there are few speakers left, the information of their language might be incomplete or tainted. Therefore, the best approach might be to document the most endangered languages first and then move on to those that still have some time left. Giving priority to those languages which are most likely to disappear proves useful. It also helps understanding trends better, and analyzing the processes that go on within endangered languages themselves.

Nonetheless, for the sake of the pure linguistic information, documentation is far more important than maintenance of a language, and hence this approach does not provide a powerful reason to promote language maintenance.

Third approach: the knowledge inside a language

<sup>5</sup> Many international programmes have been set forth to address language documentation. The Hans Rausing Endangered Language Project (<http://www.hrelp.org>), the Foundation for Endangered Languages (<http://www.ogmios.org>) and the Volkswagen Stiftung (VolkswagenStiftung, 2007), among many others, offer funding through grants that aim at language documentation projects. Quoting the latter: "The initiative cannot stop [language disappearance], but it can make sure that testimony to these language cultures, which are mostly only passed on by word of mouth, is recorded in an electronic archive of endangered languages before they vanish without trace: by means of audio tape, video camera, still camera and note pad." (VolkswagenStiftung, 2007).

*“Languages [...] are the repositories of past experience and once lost, a great deal of effort will be required to recover what has been lost with them”*  
(Muehlhaesler, 2001, p. 143)

Every language is a vessel for the knowledge of the population which uses it. Inscribed in all sorts of external expressions, every language has found ways to describe everyday difficulties, developments and solutions. Groups have embedded their social rules, technological advancements, agricultural experiences and many other details, in songs and poems. This information would be completely lost when the language disappears.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, every language is deeply connected with its surroundings. People give names to the elements to which they are constantly exposed. Common threats, medicinal plants and ritual functions are given a lexicographic position in every language (Maffi, 2001). Story telling, songs and books are the way in which this knowledge is kept alive and passed on from generation to generation. Although the myth of the Eskimo’s 20 words for snow might be easily argued (Pinker 1994), the crucial point is that an Eskimo is most likely to remember words and sentences referring to different kinds of snow than to different kinds of sand, being evidently exposed to the former much more than the latter. To prove this uniqueness of every language, there is no need for point-to-point comparison from one language to the other. Already the concept of ‘word’ might be debated when one considers a word for word translation (Pinker, 1999). What is essential is the knowledge inherent to the communication practices. Though the English language might possess the names of every single kind of fish known to mankind, it is more likely for an English-speaking fisherman to know the name of fish and tell the difference among them than it is for an English-speaking cattle rancher.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Look at the variety of examples summarized in Maffi, L. (2001), Nettle, D. & Romaine, S. (2000), or the specific case described in Andrianarivo, J. (1999).

<sup>7</sup> For a similar analysis, albeit in a different context, take a look at the examples given by Nettle, D. & Romaine, S. (2000, pp. 56-62).

Obviously, no single group has a never-ending pool of knowledge, and not all of its conclusions should be assumed to be correct; neither should the opposite be taken for granted. But the local knowledge embedded in a language might be precious to the preservation of the specific environment or to basic improvements of the standards of life of its users. To ignore this local familiarity might lead to a loss of empirical information gathered throughout decades of living in a unique environment (Maffi, 2001).

This approach demands an elaborated level of conservation of the language through which the knowledge of the community is recorded and kept alive to further use. Documentation is not enough, because it does not provide the people with the information they need for survival. The preservation requires the community itself to continue carrying out the practices which hold the information and passing them from generation to generation, to maintain the knowledge pool within the boundaries of the society that needs them. That way it remains anchored to its language and environment, and continues to help the speaker population.

Documentation and analysis supersedes language maintenance still. Reinforcing the importance of local knowledge and encouraging its use might also help maintain the language. However, the main goal remains to funnel information and not to keep the language alive. The latter is only a positive side effect of the former, still not protecting language on its own.

Fourth approach: language as a primordial heritage right

*“In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language”*  
(UN, 1976).

Any person should have the right to have a life, a name and to live free of slavery. These are just excerpts from the Universal Declaration on Human

Rights (UN, 1948) ratified by the United Nations, which are also part of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN, 1976). Accordingly, humanity shall also have the right to use and pass on to further generations the languages they have inherited from their forefathers. Just like any other inalienable right, language shall be seen as heritage and thus, as one of the most precious constituents of any group or culture.

Language serves as a medium for culture's traditions and lore, in the same way that artifacts or buildings resemble its beliefs and architectural prowess. On the other hand, the loss of such a precious part of a culture might have detrimental effects to the concerned group as a whole. It is worth stressing that language repression has been often cited as one of the spurring causes of civil warfare inside once peaceful states (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999).

Every effort within our reach should be spent to ensure that the treasures and values conveyed and carried by a language are not lost. The interconnection between its artistic expressions, its formal (linguistic) capital, and its codified knowledge, add on to the identity-generating importance of every given language, in order to promote its conservation.

When a language dies, the world loses a unique collection of speeches, structures and data which might never exist again; the whole of humanity observes a part of its past and future wane.


## Conclusions

There is still a chance to protect a good quantity and quality of our world's linguistic heritage. There are also four strong approaches which give us reasons to prevent language disappearance and to take steps to address language endangerment: to preserve the aesthetic treasures of language; to preserve the linguistic knowledge inherent to it; to preserve the environmental and social knowledge of the language; and to preserve and maintain language as a vital, intrinsic part of the heritage right of a people. The premise of 6,000 languages in 191

countries implies that every country would benefit from the maintenance of its endangered languages (Tsunoda, 2001).

Certainly, projects not necessarily designed to protect languages could help doing so by adding one of the former approached to their work. An environmental project could certainly include a research on endangered language vocabulary dealing with endemic and non-endemic species, and a project for the support of a certain cultural tradition (e.g. a ritual) may include the songs, poems or prayers made in the endangered language. These four approaches aim at showing how many different fields of knowledge may benefit from undertaking steps in favor of protecting endangered languages. Whether as a secondary aim of a project, or as the main goal of it, these four approaches help us understand different possibilities for the protection of our human heritage.

UNESCO has recognized this need and has developed a program specifically for endangered languages, aiming at awareness-raising, capacity building and mobilization of international cooperation (UNESCO, 2007). Its 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003, p. 3) mentions "language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage", although it does not cover it under its scope, probably because of the political implications that language still brings about in the modern discourse of nationhood. Beside UNESCO, other international organizations like Terralingua (<http://www.terralingua.org>) and Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.org>) have undertaken the task of promoting language protection.

By maintaining languages as our common heritage we are able to understand ourselves better. As main vessels of our communication practices, they carry with them the meanings we pass from generation to generation. They are the heritage of every single culture that has used them, becoming also a mirror to the culture itself. To let languages die implies a loss that cannot even be fathomed; the loss of one of our most wonderful creations. 

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