A Place for All Languages: On Language Vitality and Revitalization

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Languages are spoken by individuals, but it is only through the community that they can flourish. However, knowing a language is a personal attribute that is of little use unless shared with others. Members of speech communities discuss how their languages are used and how the meanings are interpreted.

Thus, language is personal and at the same time intensely social.

For these reasons one's identity is deeply rooted in language, which often encapsulates the user's entire being. This widely accepted fact is effectively captured in the following words:

> Language is the outward expression of an accumulation of learning and experience shared by a group of people over centuries of development. It is not simply a vocal symbol; it is a dynamic force, which shapes the way a man looks at the world, his thinking about the world and his philosophy of life. Knowing his maternal language helps a man to know himself; being proud of his language helps a man to be proud of himself. (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972: 14–15, cited in Blair, Paskemin and Laderoute, 2003: 93).[1]

The vitality of a language is challenged when individual speakers abandon it and shift to a new tongue. Whether this choice is made voluntarily or by coercion, to stop speaking and transmitting one's heritage language to younger generations is a personal decision. When languages ultimately vanish because of these individual language choices, whole communities and even all humanity may be impacted by the consequences. With each disappearing language a wealth of human capacity and knowledge manifested by both individual speakers and speech communities is lost.

Reasons for language loss

People choose to abandon a language for various and complex reasons. In many communities, those speaking an endangered language often consider it rather backward and not fully functional. In other communities, however, people may be galvanized into revitalization activities when experiencing a sense of threat to their languages. They may, for example, begin documenting their linguistic and cultural heritage[2] or create environments such as kindergartens, in which their languages are spoken exclusively. Language shift frequently accompanies the transition from 'tradition' to 'modernity'. By and large, the use of a language in urban contexts, education, religion, technology and 'modern' economic transactions heightens its prestige within the speaking community.

Most contemporary societies are heterogeneous socio-political entities comprised of diverse cultural and linguistic groups. Some of these heterogeneous societies push their smaller communities into political, cultural or linguistic assimilation, sometimes coercively. Others allow and maintain their heterogeneity for various reasons, such as securing access to regional or minority groups' resources or seeking to strengthen diversity as a resource in itself. Today, it is inevitable that different language communities come into contact with each other, sometimes resulting in unbalanced relationships among them.

In unbalanced contact situations where one group dominates, that is, one group is politically, militarily, economically or religiously stronger than the others, awareness of one's uniqueness is heightened and identity may become a contested issue. When power differences are not severe, milder forms of acculturation usually take place as cultures intermingle. More frequently, however, the weaker group has to unilaterally adjust and assimilate into the dominant culture,

8. In 1993, the Ethiopian Government introduced Mother Tongue Education. Today, more than 20 out of 90-plus Ethiopian languages are employed in Primary Education.

either voluntarily or by force. In the majority of such contact settings, language shifts co-occur.

The group as well as the individual sense of identity is foregrounded when competing identities emerge. Members of small groups may have mixed feelings towards more powerful groups, feeling either threatened by or attracted to them, with various push and pull factors at work. In such circumstances, communities may develop differing internal strategies with contrasting aims: either retaining or even strengthening their own identity, or assimilating into the dominant group. Marginalized people with no access to resources and excluded from decision-making processes may attempt to overcome their minority status by blending into the more prestigious group. On the other hand, they may resist assimilation and find ways to fortify their language, which often becomes a powerful symbol for their revitalization and rebirth.

The notion of 'language rights'

In our globalized world, as contacts intensify among language communities, conflicts often arise. The idea of 'language rights' emerged out of such conflicts. Sue Wright (2007) addresses the nature of the controversies that have often obscured the meaning of 'language rights'. Regarding language use by a community she writes:

> The right to use one's own language has only recently gained acceptance as a fundamental human right. Until the end of the 20th century, whether or not a language community used its language in the public space depended on its political muscle or the tolerance of the dominant groups among which it lived. Those in

use of the RML [regional or minority language] in the public space (2007: 203).[3]

Summarizing the debate Wright concludes: 'in effect, individual language rights may mean little because to implement them they must become group rights' (2007: 204). Yet, when we begin to deal with 'group rights' to language, the matter becomes even more complicated and confusing, because 'group rights to language' entails the question of 'standardization'. The use of a language in public spaces, especially in official spheres (schools, for example) requires its standardization, and to achieve it, community members must reach an agreement upon a 'form' that everyone recognizes as their language.

The danger of 'folklorization'

In many countries, but especially in developed ones, ethnic rebirth among ethnolinguistic minorities is usually accompanied by an increased interest in their heritage languages. However, as ethnic awareness spreads, 'folklorization' surfaces as a real threat to the survival of minority languages. 'Folklorization' is a term used by Joshua Fishman (1987)[4] to denote the use of 'local' languages in irrelevant domains, thereby denying them access to meaningful areas of contemporary life. Where this has happened, minority languages must be 'de-folklorized', promoted and developed so that they can be used in relevant domains of modern life. Many conscious efforts have been made in this regard, for example, with languages of the First Nations of North America. While 'folklorization' of minority languages is a rare phenomenon on the African continent, Papua New Guinea and other places, the spread of the

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9. Mapoyo elder listening to the presentation of the newly developed alphabet at Palomo, Venezuela, 2004.

power might make it possible to use a language other than their own in the institutions and forums of public life, but such use was not universally accepted as a right

On individual language rights, she states:

Even when international bodies finally enshrined in declarations the fundamental right of individuals to speak their language of choice, the intention was that speakers would be protected from persecution or unequal treatment. There was usually no explicit commitment, or even implicit intention, to guarantee

'Western' value system through formal education may change this situation in the future.

The following paragraphs describe some aspects of how a language may display itself or be dealt with in a given region or situation. The discussion may help us become aware of, and judge the health condition of minority languages in multilingual settings.

Expressions of language vitality: the dominant group's attitudes towards languages[5]

In linguistically heterogeneous societies, the dominant group may desire to have total control of the otherwise diverse populations. Frequently in the name of national unity, the powerful group declares its own language as the national or official language of the State, relegating or even forbidding the use of other languages. Katriina Kilpi writing on the Eurolang website (Friday, 23 November 2007)[6] talks about the intolerance Finnish-speakers face in Sweden: 'Ms Tiina Kiveliö, the Head of Development of Employment and Adult Education of Uppsala municipality, has filed a complaint to the office of the Ombudsmen for Ethnic Discrimination (DO) after Kiveliö and her colleague had been forbidden to speak Finnish at their work place.' Whereas the immediate problem is whether or not only Swedish is permitted as the main language at the workplace, the underlying issue is the linguistic rights of the Finnish-speaking minority. In the United States, the debates on English as the only official language continue to occur especially in the context of immigration issues.

Through *national language policies*, many governments impose the use of a particular language on all citizens, ignoring in the process all the other languages that may be spoken in the country. They may decide upon a 'one language, one nation' policy for the sake of 'national unity', or out of a desire to strengthen their international status, or because they believe that a monolingual State guarantees a stronger economic front *vis-à-vis* other nations.[7] Such policies obviously have direct and crucial implications for all ethnolinguistic minorities living in that State.

In addition to governmental language attitudes and policies, there are even more complex matters affecting the languages of ethnolinguistic groups. For instance, in situations where there are competing varieties of a language, their respective speakers may control access to different *valued* resources.[8] These could be economic, political, religious or emotional, and in general of a social and cultural nature. Thus, limited resources or threatened access to them, whether real or not, may trigger specific attitudes toward dialects and their more or less powerful speakers, thereby biasing language policies in favour of one or other variety.[9]

Ethnolinguistic groups' reactions to the dominant group's language attitudes[10]

Community response to linguistic discrimination differs widely depending on the community's internal structure and its relationship with the government or dominant group. Not long ago, a *Wall Street Journal* article (16 November 2007) entitled 'Euskera, the Very Ancient Basque Language, Struggles for Respect', commenting on a previous article entitled 'Basque Inquisition: How Do You Say Shepherd in Euskera?' (6 November

2007), prompted a particularly strong feedback from Basque speakers:[11]

> I suppose you thought you were quite clever by using the word 'inquisition' ... which almost everyone associates with the bloody rampage of medieval Spain to rid the Iberian Peninsula of Muslims, Jews and other undesirables. The implication here is that Basques are attempting some form of ethnic cleansing through their linguistic policies. This idea is furthered by the subtitle 'Through Fiat, Basques Bring Old Tongue to Life.' The word fiat means an authoritative decree or order, such as a royal fiat.

A few days later, Edu Lartzanguren responded in *Donostia* with 'Basque Uproar over *Wall Street Journal* Article' (20 November 2007):

> The Basque language, Euskara, is a primitive, backward, useless language that nobody wants to learn, but is being imposed on a suffering population by evil nationalists entrenched in power in the Basque Country. This is the thrust of the message that one of America's most influential newspapers, The Wall Street Journal, has conveyed to its readers in an article published last week. The report has created an uproar in the Basque Country with writers, academics, journalists and the Basque Government writing in protest to the newspaper.

The Basques' strong reaction to humiliating comments on their language by an outside journalist shows that the Basque language has gained a political and cultural stand in its country. Similar negative statements on the backwardness and uselessness of heritage languages, however, are frequently made by members of the communities themselves. Many small communities no longer value their own cultural and linguistic tradition, and abandon their own heritage languages as they shift to dominant ones.

Ethnolinguistic communities must share a positive outlook regarding their languages in order to promote their use and transmit them to future generations. Schools may teach and promote threatened languages, but far more important for the vitality of a language is its everyday use within families and community members. Only this genuine intensive and extensive use of the language guarantees the maintenance of a healthy number of speakers.

Attempts to increase the number of speakers[12]

The absolute number of speakers and the proportion of speakers within the community are important factors for the vitality of minority languages. Various strategies can be employed to increase these figures. In many linguistically vulnerable communities where small numbers of competent speakers still exist, the immersion approach is the most effective strategy to educate children and make them carriers of cultural and linguistic traditions to future generations. In communities where only a few elderly speakers are left, a one-to-one 'master–apprentice' approach is a more promising method for transmitting linguistic and cultural traditions to the young.[13] All these strategies aim at increasing the number of speakers of the heritage language among children.

There are thousands of languages which are not used for instruction in schools, nor taught as part of the school curriculum in formal education. This is true for approximately 2,000 African languages. Similarly, in Papua New Guinea

and Amazonia, for example, most students are taught in languages other than their own, and on the African continent less than 5 per cent of native languages are taught in schools. Yet, even where communities' languages are employed in this official domain, schools frequently find it difficult to recruit and train teachers in sufficient numbers.[14] Where transmission is threatened, the language needs to be reinforced both inside and outside schools. The more it is heard at home and in public spaces, such as governmental offices, businesses, entertainment, newspapers, radio, television and cyberspace, the more vital it will be. For a language to remain strong, a large number of speakers is a definite advantage.

Expanding the use of a language

At the final meeting of the UNESCO Ad-hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (Paris, March 2003), participants discussed at length how to promote their use[15] in public domains. Obviously, the more actively a language is employed in the public domains, the better its chances are of remaining strong. However, promoting the use of minority languages in public spheres is fraught with difficulties. Such usage is often emotionally charged, may raise economic concerns, or become an intense political issue, as happened in Belgium for example. Màrtainn MacLeòid reports the following from Glaschu/Glasgow (Friday, 23 November 2007):

> The BBC is facing strong criticism from politicians and language activists alike for recent decisions involving Gaelic, Scots and Cornish.

> The BBC Trust, an independent watchdog body, has this week published its provisional conclusions on the BBC Executive's proposals for a new Gaelic digital television channel in partnership with the Gaelic Media Service.

> Their Public Value Test has provisionally concluded that while the proposals could provide a good service to the public, not enough evidence has been given that they offer value for money. It warns that the plans for a Gaelic broadcasting service will be rejected unless more evidence can be provided that the new channel will justify its cost.

The Trust has initiated a public consultation to seek further clarification from the BBC Executive on its proposals before announcing a final decision on this issue by the end of January 2008.[16] The BBC Trust expects that an attempt will be made: 'to show how the service would contribute to the long-term survival of Gaelic, to appeal to an audience wider than the 92,000 people in Scotland who understand Gaelic and to be of educational benefit.' The Scots and Cornish communities are also voicing their discontent on the BBC because of the BBC's failure:

> to mention either language in its statement of Public Purposes, a mission statement for the corporation which is committed to implementing under the terms of the BBC charter. The document states that the BBC's output should support the UK's indigenous languages 'such as Gaelic, Welsh, Irish and Ulster Scots', but fails to specifically mention either Scots or Cornish.

The writer Màrtainn MacLeòid reports that a motion has been lodged in the Scottish Parliament calling for Scots to be mentioned:

> According to Dr Wilson: 'It's about time the BBC acknowledges that Scots is a national treasure

– a highly descriptive and characterful language, a language that has survived despite concerted attempts to extinguish it. The BBC should be proud of our country and its three indigenous languages. Together, Scots, Gaelic and English shaped us. Continue to deny one of them and you damage our identity and prevent the country reaching its full cultural potential.' (Eurolang 2007)[16]

As the above case shows, in the eyes of policy-makers, the use of 'regional' or 'minority' languages in the public domain may not primarily be an issue of cultural recognition. Instead, officials often approach the question largely on economic terms, focusing on the presumed high 'costs' involved and the lack of available resources to support widespread use of minority languages.

Endorsement of, and support for, the vitality of languages and speech varieties require use of the language *in public domains* as well as *in documentation*. While standardization is considered crucial for the recognition of a language as *the* language of the community, it is also important to acknowledge and support the existing speech varieties within the community. In many cases, oral languages are rich in regional and social variations, and in these settings all natural varieties, and not just a 'standardized' variety, must be recorded, annotated and described. Oral as well as written language materials should be produced, such as dictionaries, grammars, stories, biographies, poetry, radio scripts, television programmes, newspapers and so on. These products, as well as the documentation process itself, help promote the threatened language and often foster a positive attitude toward the heritage

language both within and without the language community.[18]

Some programmes in Australia follow such strategies. In the State of New South Wales, Australia, over 250 Aboriginal languages were spoken at the time of the arrival of the European settlers. Today, only twenty languages are left, and fewer than 3,000 people speak an indigenous language, according to Nicola Fell.[19] As a result:

> In New South Wales, all students have to learn a second language, and this policy being pioneered by the state government aims to make indigenous languages the main option, along with Chinese and French. ... In a nation where indigenous culture suffered greatly since European settlement, [Rob Randal of the New South Wales Department of Education] says the reason for this new program goes beyond mere education.

Michael Walsh, a linguist at the University of Sydney, says revitalizing languages can help people such as Australia's Aborigines recover their lost identity. He further states 'I've seen specific instances where Aboriginal people have had a terrible life, and the mere reintroduction of their language has been enough to turn their life around from one of despair and hopelessness to one of optimism, and an ability to function much more effectively in the wider society.'

Celebrating the declaration of the year 2008 as International Year of Languages, Koïchiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO, pointed out that languages are 'essential to the identity of groups and individuals and to their peaceful

coexistence. They constitute a strategic factor of progress towards sustainable development and a harmonious relationship between the global and the local context.'[20]

He emphasized the vital role languages play in: social integration (especially eradication of poverty and hunger); universal education (learning life skills); and hygiene and health (especially combat against HIV/AIDS, malaria and other communicative diseases).

He concluded that each and every language crucially contributes toward the richness of human existence by providing cultural and linguistic diversity and that local and indigenous knowledge is intrinsically linked to local and indigenous languages.

Underlying these important roles is the dual nature of language. It is intensely personal and at the same time deeply communal. Through language, an individual shapes thoughts and feelings, in other words, creates a world that is inevitably anchored in a particular human and natural environment. In this way, languages present and represent not only individuals and groups, but also their surrounding environments.

As people everywhere increasingly share one global world, attaining proficiency in so-called 'world languages' becomes an advantage, or at least an attractive option. The spread of a handful of global languages, however, should not mean the sacrifice of thousands of heritage languages. Most ethnolinguistic minorities have always been multilingual, using for wider communication a lingua franca acquired in addition to the ethnic

tongue. Yet, in spite of these language skills, the growth of a few dominant languages is currently leading to the demise of local tongues. This global process of linguistic homogenization is largely fuelled by the widespread social discrimination and ethnic stigmatization of minorities. Minority languages will only stay vital if communities develop meaningful roles for their languages in their everyday lives and find good reasons to speak and transmit them to their children.

> I speak my language
>
> because
>
> That's who I am.
>
> I teach my language to my children
>
> because
>
> I want them to be proud of who they are.
>
> Mrs Christine Johnson (Tohono O'odham Elder,
> Summer 2002)

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UNESCO documents *Language Vitality and Endangerment* and *Linguistic Diversity in Relation to Biodiversity* are found at http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00136.

NOTES

1. H. A. Blair, D. Paskemin and B. Laderoute, 'Preparing Indigenous Language Advocates', in J. Reyhner, O. Trujillo, R. L. Carrasco, and L. Lockard (eds), *Nurturing Native Languages* (Flagstaff: Northern Arizona University, 2003), pp. 93–104.

2. Traditionally such documentation and research activities have been conducted by outside researchers and organizations. Nowadays, however, language communities increasingly demand control over the terms, conditions and results of the research, and claim rights to its outcomes.

3. Wright's article, 'The Right to Speak One's Own Language: Reflections on Theory and Practice' (*Language Policy Volume* 6, 2007, pp. 203–24), presents an excellent discussion on the individual's 'private' right to use one's language in the private sphere and on the individual's 'public' right to use one's language in the public space. Beatrice Cabau-Lampa (2007) also discusses these issues using languages in Sweden as a case study (see n.6 below).

4. J. A. Fishman, 'Language Spread and Language Policy for Endangered Languages', in *Georgetown University Round Table on Language and Linguistics 1987* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987), pp. 1–15.

5. For a related discussion, see UNESCO document: *Language Vitality and Endangerment*, Factor 7, 'Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use', http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00136.

6. K. Kilpi, 'Problems for Finnish Speakers in Sweden', *Eurolang*, 23 November 2007, http://www.eurolang.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2992&Itemid=1&lang=en.

7. B. Cabau-Lampa, 'Mother Tongue plus Two European Languages in Sweden: Unrealistic Educational Goal?', *Language Policy* 6 (2007): 333–58.

8. L. M. Khbchandani, 'Languages Threatened in a Plural Milieu: Dialectics of Speech Variation and Globalization', in R. Elangaiyan, R. McKenna Brown, N. D. M. Ostler and M. K. Verma (eds), *Vital Voices: Endangered Languages and Multilingualism (Proceedings of the Tenth FEL Conference, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore, India, 25–7 October 2006)* (Mysore, India: Central Institute of Indian Languages, 2007), pp. 3–9; E. E. Benedicto, M. Dolores, G. Fendly and T. Gómez, 'Language Loss to an Invisible Enemy: The Case of the Tuahka', in Elangaiyan, McKenna Brown, Ostler and Verma (eds), *Vital Voices*, pp. 53–60.

9. The diversity of languages and/or dialects in a given region or society may be the result of invited or uninvited migration. In different parts of the world, we have seen one tribal group migrating into another group's territory overpowering the original residents by their sheer number, economic resourcefulness, political abilities or other grounds. For further discussion on these issues, see H. Basantarani, 'Multilingualism Endangered', Elangaiyan, McKenna Brown, Ostler and Verma (eds), *Vital Voices*, pp. 13–22.

10. For further discussion, see UNESCO document *Language Vitality and Endangerment*: Factor 8 'Community Members' Attitudes towards Their Own Language'.

11. These are archived in Eurolang Home Page http://www.eurolang.net/index.php, with the ID #2988.

12. For a related discussion, we refer our readers to UNESCO document *Language Vitality and Endangerment*: Factor 1 'Intergenerational Language Transmission,' Factor 2 'Absolute Number of Speakers' and Factor 3 'Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population'.

13. L. Hinton, with M. Vera and N. Steele, *How to Keep Your Language Alive: A Commonsense Approach to One-on-One Language Learning* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2002).

14. K. Kilpi, 'Problems for Finnish Speakers in Sweden', *Eurolang*, 23 November 2007, http://www.eurolang.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2992&Itemid=1&lang=en. The Eurolang website posts the case of Sámi people's struggle to find teachers (Gent, Friday, 23 November 2007 by Katriina Kilpi): 'The municipalities of the Sámi homeland in Finland are facing difficulties in finding Sámi language teachers for schools. / Utsjoki county, had no applicants for the positions of general teacher and subject teacher this year. In Vuotso town, Sámi language teaching started a week late from the official beginning of the school year and in Hetta one of the parents had to step in to give Sámi teaching. In Inari county, the biggest difficulties

have been in providing teaching in Inari and Skolt Sámi languages. / Regardless of the lack of teachers, there is an increase in the number of students learning Sámi. This year there has been a total of 489 students learning Sámi, of which 146 study in Sámi language. Outside of the Sámi homeland, 60 students have been studying Sámi language. / The reasons behind the difficulties are many, says Ms Ulla Aikio-Puoskari, the secretary of education from the Sámi Parliament's Office on Education and Instruction Material. 'Those teachers who started Sámi teaching are leaving active working life, Sámi language teaching itself is demanding due to the lack of teaching materials and finally, Norway is attracting the young Sámi speakers with more competitive wages', says Ms Aikio-Puoskari' (Eurolang, 2007). http://www.eurolang.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2991&Itemid=1&lang=en.

15. For a related discussion, see UNESCO document *Language Vitality and Endangerment*: Factor 4 'Trends in Existing Language Domains'.

16. Following a meeting on 24 January 2008 the BBC Trust gave its approval, subject to certain conditions, for the BBC in partnership with the Gaelic Media Service (GMS), to launch a Gaelic Digital Service (GDS). It will comprise a dedicated digital TV channel in Gaelic, broadcasting for up to seven hours a day, BBC Radio nan Gaidheal, and significantly enhanced Gaelic content for users of the BBC website. The Trust stated that: 'The educational benefits of the service would in fact be greater than the Trust had originally anticipated in its provisional conclusions. The further evidence provided on reach was an improvement but did not clearly demonstrate the service would appeal to an audience beyond existing Gaelic speakers.' The service is expected to launch in summer 2008 with a subsequent review to be held in 2010 to examine, in particular, whether sufficient emphasis is being placed on attracting new speakers to the Gaelic language and also whether the service is appealing to an audience beyond Gaelic speakers. The full BBC press release is available online at http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/news/press_releases/2008/gds_decision.html.

17. This article is archived in Eurolang Home Page http://www.euro-lang.net/index.php with the ID #2993.

18. Tjeerd de Graaf of Fryske Akademy speaks of the importance of documentation for scientific as well as revitalization purposes, using examples from Frisian, Ainu and languages of Sakhalin. See M. Brenzinger and T. de Graaf, 'Language Documentation and Maintenance', *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* (EOLSS 6.20B.10.3), UNESCO (2007), online encyclopaedia http://www.eolss.net.

19. Nicola Fell, 'Aboriginal Languages Slowly Making Way into Australian Schools', Sydney, 4 December 2007, archived at the *Voice of America* website, http://www.voanews.com/english/2007-12-04-voa15.cfm.

20. UNESCO Director General Koichiro Matsuura's statement appears in the UNESCO International Year of Languages site, http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=35344&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html. David Crystal has an article entitled 'What Do We Do with an International Year of Languages?', at http://www.davidcrystal.com/David_Crystal/articles.htm.