

Linguapax X World Congress
Linguistic Diversity, Sustainability and Peace
Workshop 5: Agents in Favour of Diversity
Report

1 Reflections

Premised on the fact that “the need to preserve the languages of the world and counter the processes of language shift that are taking place worldwide has become a major concern shared by researchers, scholars and leaders of many language communities”, the objectives of Linguapax X were widely publicised as:

“This Dialogue is designed to bring together all those interested in the maintenance of linguistic diversity in order to generate fruitful discussions that may be used to impede the current processes of cultural homogenisation of the world”.

This Congress has gathered considerable expertise to address this. The keynote speakers - all renowned experts in our related fields - have given their views and posited recommendations according to their own perspectives. There has been, however, considerable similarity in the insightful and incisive messages delivered.

2 The Message

Ignoring option 1 - benign neglect - of Suzanne Romaine as an inadequate stance to take, we focus on the remaining options. As a result, we endorse her views and those of others.

Recommendation 1: That immediate action is required in the areas of:

- *language documentation*
- *language revitalisation*

3 Civil Society

The particular focus of Workshop 5 was to assess the role of agents in favour of diversity. Many of these are covered by the definition of “civil society” which includes International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), but International Governmental Organisations (IGOs) could also offer much.

We believe that civil society has a major role to play in continuing and building upon the excellent work already undertaken. This is in both the areas of language documentation and language revitalisation.

While I did not give summaries of specific workshops during the final plenary forum - preferring to focus on conclusions and recommendations - acknowledgement of all presenters (of Workshop 5) is appropriate. I begin with those who had the role of initiating the series of presentations on each day:

- E. Annamalai: “Public Perception of Language Diversity”
Annamalai drew upon the integral interrelationship of biocultural diversity to linguistic diversity, before deploring the speed with which languages were disappearing and the real public ignorance or disdain of this fact. He argued the inevitability and naturalness of language loss in education and society, before urging that action be taken to address the trend.
- Nicholas Ostler: “The Defence of Language Diversity”

Founding President of the Foundation of Endangered Languages (FEL), Nick focussed far less on the significant achievements of FEL than on trends historically and globally. This provided a springboard from which to identify excellent work in progress in language documentation and revitalisation.

The remaining presenters are listed in alphabetical order (of the main speaker, if more than one were identified):

- Anikó Hatoss: “Language Maintenance and Acculturation in the Hungarian Diaspora of Queensland: a Microcosm from which to Learn”

Drawing upon her studies in northern Australia, Anikó described concrete examples of ways in which to address language shift, thus fostering maintenance of the language within a specific geographical location as one generation led into the next. Action taken by NGOs, INGOs and IGOs, provided a cohesive model which could be replicated for other languages in other locations - as many languages have signification diaspora.

- Alan Hedley: “Sustainable Development through Biocultural Diversity: the Role of International Non-Governmental Organisations”

Reflecting specification of the Workshop 5 theme, Alan presented the view that INGOs were ideally placed to promote the cause of linguistic diversity as they were:

- more powerful because of their autonomy
- relatively democratic
- able to capitalise upon the Internet for realtime interactive communication

As part of his presentation, Alan distributed the data created as a result of a websearch of INGOs identifying languages as an interest or priority. Fifty-eight were identified, which Alan classified loosely as either “activist” or “academic”.

- Kirsti Lindh (& L Gashi): “Multilingual Online Training for Cultural Understanding: Starting Points and Challenges”

Kirsti introduced her exciting international project. To use her own words predominantly, “Intercultural Learning in the Internet - “IntCultNet” - is a research and development project in which a combination of multilingual, culture-sensitive content and service product is being developed jointly by seven countries: Finland, Czech Republic, Greece, United Kingdom, Vietnam, Israel and Serbia & Montenegro. The project aims at developing an international training program and resources for learning sociocultural competence in a virtual environment.”

- Arturo Noguero (R Ramirez & D Masats): “The Plural Approach to the Teaching of Languages in School. The JaLing Project : Materials and Proposals”

Arturo reported on classroom learning activities generated directly in the context of Socrates Comenius: JaLing. Briefly tracing the roots of the movement to Eric Hawkins’ 1987 notion of “language awareness” and later Michel Candelier’s adaptation of “Evlang”, Arturo gave concrete examples of student materials, emphasising the need to teach our young to become interculturally aware internationally.

- Radojica Petrovic: “A System of Web-based Projects Sustaining Language Diversity”

Radojica’s initial premise - “the global linguistic system in its evolution between the opposing poles of many isolated language communities or a single world language should be established as a sustainable interlingual world displaying properties of diversity, integration, equity, efficiency and sustainability - provided the background for introducing three multilingual projects. All available in the virtual world, they have the design of fostering intercultural understanding (eg. Lingva Prismo and InterKulturo) and communication, or language learning online (eg. Lernu!). Originating from an INGO for one language -

the International League of Esperanto-Speaking Teachers - these projects reflect a philosophy which also favours international communication and intercultural understanding through a multilingual approach.

- Albert Raasch: “Agents to Defend Linguistic Diversity”

Focussing on the situation in the EU, Albert - the organiser of Linguapax III in Saarbrücken - stressed the need to marshal forces available to redress the disappearance of languages, more so in (primary, secondary and tertiary) education than in society at large. Such forces could include NGOs and INGOs but also parent organisations and unions. Prioritising the notion of social cohesion - especially along borders of States speaking different languages - Albert stressed the need of students in one State to learn the language of its neighbour (rather than English, for example). Extrapolating from this position, he considered the implications for teacher training and professional development.

- Delors Solà (& J Vinyet): “Volunteers for the Catalan Language”

Delors and her team described an innovative local project where a volunteer group in Catalonia had organised a welcoming, mentoring and teaching approach to international visitors. Different members of the group described various aspects of the project, with one of its beneficiaries informing the workshop of his experiences in being an overseas recipient of the voluntary project.

- Barbara Trudell: “The Role of Local Agency in the Defence of Minority Languages: Indigenous Language Committees in Northwest Cameroon”

Building upon her work for SIL International, Barbara described her recent work in the Northwest province of Cameroon. Here, several language committees formed to promote local languages in response to community need. What was also critical was the fact that it was the local community in each case which, having identified the need, gave rise to the language committee to address the language loss.

4 Contexts for Language Revitalisation

4.1 Minority Languages

All languages could be defined as a minority language in certain contexts - even English, where its speakers could be grossly outnumbered in a given geographical location (eg. China, Russia, Latin America, etc).

Recommendation 2: That we define “minority language” as broadly as possible, thus potentially engaging the support of agencies which exist for a wide range of languages.

4.2 Interpretation of Revitalisation

Similarly, we should adopt a flexible and broad approach in our notion of revitalisation, as this could be relevant in the contexts of:

- language death
- language shift
- languages in education (policy)
- languages policy

Recommendation 3: That we adopt the notion of language revitalisation not only in its specific context of language loss but also in other areas where languages are disappearing in society, education and policy.

The evident advantage of adopting such a position is to increase the cohorts - also with a particular contextualised vested interest - who could support the cause of fighting against the disappearance of languages.

4.2.1 Language Death

Coined by David Crystal as the title of his 2000 volume, language death is self-explanatory as referring to the disappearance of languages - perhaps between 50 and 90 per cent this century - for all time (unless in exceptional circumstances). This language loss occurs in the homeplace and/or in local areas. In the presentations of Workshop 5, the best solution identified (by Barbara Trudell) for civil society in this situation was the home-grown initiative and language committee formed within and by the community in Northern Cameroon.

Recommendation 4: That, wherever possible, national and international (civil society) organisations work closely with community groups on initiatives to redress language loss.

Such action would reflect the view of Skuttnab-Kangas (2003:82) who states: “community initiative and involvement seems to be decisive for (language) revitalisation to work”. In this respect, however, we must be cautious about imposing ourselves upon communities which, after all, own their own language and culture.

4.2.2 Language Shift

Languages are also disappearing - or dying - in the context of language shift. As members of diaspora find themselves moving through generational phases (perhaps) far from their homeplace, language maintenance often wanes, giving way to the pressures of another linguistic environment which is perceived to be stronger, more prosperous and more desirable. Subsequently, the languages of migrant groups disappear over time.

Recommendation 5: That wherever possible, national and international (civil society) organisations work closely with government groups on initiatives to redress language shift.

On behalf of such groups, allies can also be identified. An example provided by Anikó Hatoss in Workshop 5 was that of Hungarian in Australia, where an international conference would take place (in Melbourne), politically and financially supported by the Government of Hungary, the Hungarian Embassy and Consulates - and community organisations (ie. INGOs and NGOs).

Recommendation 6: That collaborative models be publicised and replicated internationally as a concrete step to arrest language shift in linguistic and cultural diaspora.

4.2.3 Languages in Education Policy

Language choice in schools may also be the basis of linguistic diversity in the educational context. As English appears more desirable to many - perhaps as the only language apart from one's first - other languages are losing ground in education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. As more communities, students and schools select English, there is a resultant decline in the numbers of students taking other major languages of the globe (eg. French, German, Russian, Spanish in the EU and elsewhere).

The governments of these countries appear to be concerned at this decline in the study of their languages - as linguistic and cultural disinterest could lead to a lack of economic interest - so are taking steps politically (at home and abroad) to promote their languages. France is now doing this as part of a plurilingual platform.

Recommendation 7: That, wherever possible, national and international (civil society) organisations work closely with educational systems and institutions to foster the continuity of linguistic diversity.

Recommendation 8: That, wherever possible, national and international (civil society) organisations work closely with federal governments to promote their languages in a collaborative manner, thus creating a stronger front (politically and economically) in unity.

A specific example cited in Workshop 5 was that presented by Albert Raasch, who identified border areas as a prime target for maintaining linguistic diversity. Where communities on opposite sides of a border (eg. along the Rhine) speak different languages, this appears a wonderful opportunity for schools on one side of the border to teach the language of the other, thus fostering social cohesion and intercultural harmony.

Recommendation 9: That all educational authorities be encouraged to adopt languages in education policies which promote multilingualism.

4.2.4 Languages Policy

At the national and international levels, language policies are required which promote the acceptance and usage of languages within society. An excellent starting point would be the EU as it expands to 25 member states, embracing over 20 languages. Others should also be included.

Recommendation 10: That INGOs, NGOs and celebrated organisations, such as the UN and UNESCO, encourage all countries/member states to enact language policies which are inclusive, multilingual and non-discriminatory.

Intercultural understanding can be the direct product of linguistic diversity, communication and friendship. This could be fostered by:

- governments in the establishment of informed languages policies
- such INGOs as the International League of Esperanto-Speaking Teachers - as reported by Radojica Petrovic in Workshop 5 - or through other multilingual websites such as that of the Fédération Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes (FIPLV)
- projects, such as IntCultNet - reported by Kirsti Lindh - linking students from several countries electronically through the Internet
- the expansion of educational programs (such as JaLing and EvLang) in schools - as reported by Arturo Noguerol
- other grass-roots projects such as the volunteer group welcoming immigrants to Barcelona - as reported by Delors Solà

Recommendation 11: That INGOs, NGOs and other agencies collaborate, wherever possible, to foster international understanding, harmony and peace.

5 Means of Action

Action should be concerted and united on all fronts, at all levels, in all areas.

Civil society can act collaboratively and has the tools to commence and, thanks to Alan Hedley, we have a database of INGOs identified on the Web as having a vested interest in languages. Whether these organisations are identified as activist or academic is irrelevant; what is important is that we have a tool to unite all these agents of civil society in a shared cause.

Recommendation 12: That the Linguapax Institute use the database of INGOs identified as promoting languages as a starting point to unite those INGOs in a campaign to promote linguistic diversity in all contexts.

Such a campaign needs to be undertaken in both the real and virtual worlds. Just as we promote linguistic diversity in and among peoples, so we should be doing the same on the Web (where English still dominates with around 40 per cent content).

Clearly, civil society by itself is not likely to be successful in the campaign. Allies need to be identified to add strength and finances to the cause.

Recommendation 13: That, as a priority of this united campaign, the Linguapax Institute exhort all INGOs, NGOs and other agencies of civil society to network with local, national and international governments, businesses and conglomerates in the global market.

It is only by uniting all potential allies that we may achieve some success in the campaign which we recognise as a priority: to retain and promote linguistic diversity across the globe to foster intercultural acceptance, harmony and peace.

Denis Cunningham

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Moderator (and on behalf of) Workshop 5: Agents in Favour of Diversity