

The Defence of Language Diversity

Nicholas Ostler, Foundation for Endangered Languages
172 Bailbrook Lane Bath BA1 7AA, England
nostler@chibcha.demon.co.uk
www.ogmios.org

A Curious Change

A curious change came over the world in the 1990s. Smaller communities began to assert themselves, and for the first time since the stirrings of 19th-century nationalism, their national governments began to respond not to suppress them, but to encourage. It was no longer assumed, as it had long been — whether blithely or crassly — that the future would belong to the nations' centralized, dominating cultures. Worldwide there seems to be growing a new sense: “small communities have something that big ones lack.”

And small languages, the distinctive possessions of those small communities, have been the gainers. They may still face an uncertain future, but increasingly they face it with hope, and a gathering band of enthusiastic supporters.

This change can be seen almost everywhere, so examples are not hard to find. I shall content myself with four of them. I hope their remoteness from one another, and their differences of background culture, will suggest how remarkable this widespread and apparently simultaneous resurgence has been.

Welsh in Wales

Closest to home, for me living in Bath, is the turn-around in the fortunes of the Welsh language. Since census figures had been kept, in the mid 19th century, it had been a truism that recorded figures for users of the Welsh language had been declining every decade. In the 1950s, 60s and even 70s, Welsh was widely seen as a moribund language, strongest among the old and in the (diminishing) Chapel congregations. The decline bottomed out between 1981 and 1991, and 2001 saw the first tentative increase in numbers of Welsh speakers. Even more encouragingly, the proportion of Welsh-speakers in the rising generation has been increasing all through this period.¹ This increase in real use of the language has been reinforced by political developments, notably the 1993 Welsh Language Act, which created the Welsh Language Board, and UK's ratification of the European Charter for Regional and Minority languages in 1998, which commits the national government to various support measures.

Australian Aboriginals: new activism

Moving round the world from Wales to the antipodes, we can attest parallel developments on behalf of another minority community, Australia's aboriginals. In 1992, after two centuries of the so-called *Terra Nullius* doctrine, which denied that Australian aboriginals had actually been the owners of the continent before white British people started to settle, the “Mabo” judgement was handed down which for the first time recognized Native Title to this land. A succession of legal claims have followed, in which members of various aboriginal tribes have claimed back their traditional territories; to

back their cases, they often appealed to the existence of stories with clear geographical settings in their own traditional language cultures. Throughout the 1990s, the Aboriginal Reconciliation Commission was at work, and in the 2000s networks of Australian Language Centres have been set up, documenting those languages and providing a basis for literacy in them, with teaching materials and straight book publishing.

Ainu in Japan

Due north of Australia, on the other side of the Equator is Japan. By and large, Japan has been according to its own concept a homogeneous nation; but it has only been able to maintain this fiction by ignoring the existence of a complete race and culture that once dominated its northern reaches. By the 19th century sustained Japanese immigration meant that the Ainu had become a minority even in their main territory, the island of Hokkaido. Despite a “Hokkaido Ainu Preservation Law” encouraging Ainu to cultivate the land, passed in 1899, the Ainu continued to decline throughout the 20th century.

Nevertheless, after sustained agitation in 1997 a new Act of the Japanese Diet has been passed, entitled “Encouragement of Ainu Culture and the Diffusion and Enlightenment of Knowledge on Ainu Tradition.” It promotes research on Ainu culture and the study of the Ainu language, and supports preservation of Ainu customs. It marks an opportunity — though perhaps too late — to make a new start in actively sustaining an Ainu community on its traditional land.

Educación Bilingüe Intercultural in Peru

Across the Pacific in Peru, there has been a determined effort to institute education in the languages that predate the Spanish conquest. This is the activity called “Educación Bilingüe Intercultural” (EBI), which has been applied most extensively using the Quechua language, once spread along the Andean coastline by the Incas, and still surviving in most of that area. Since this language became officialized in Peru in 1975, there have been a series of pioneering programmes in EBI, notably that based in the southerly province of Puno (Perú) supported by German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) during 1979-1990. This produced texts in two indigenous languages (Quechua and Aymara) for all subjects and grades of primary education in Peru.

But it extends beyond these two relatively widespread languages. Amazonian languages too are being encouraged in programmes which work at the lower levels of education, by organizations such as the Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana – AIDSESP (the Interethnic Association for Development of the Peruvian Forest).

In brief

To sum up so far, small language communities are no longer resigned to be part of a “Disappearing World”. In different parts of the world, and in very different social contexts, it is becoming accepted that minority languages have an important role to play in the development programmes of modern states.

Why Now? Some Conjectures

An interesting question, worth asking *en passant*, is why this new surge of energy and spirit to resist has come about so recently. The 1990s, after all, came one or two full generations after the fulfilment of the last of the nationalist independence movements, movements which had extended through the 19th and 20th centuries, and dissolved all of Europe's overseas empires. Despite the increasing urgency, and political success, of calls for self-determination that occurred in that period, the rights of small minorities and indigenous groups had not been asserted. Why should they only be noticed now, when most of the world has already long been run by governments which are locally based?

The answer seems to be that political independence was largely achieved by and for urban elites, not indigenous populations. This was so clearly true in the pioneering French Revolution of the 1790s that the name of the then victorious party, the Jacobins, is still used in France to characterize a centralizing, metropolitan approach to language policies. All over the world, revolutionaries and liberators were often happy to enlist the support of indigenous groups, and appeal to their gloriously distinct histories to give their movements an identity as different as possible from the powers they wished to supplant, but the defence of their diversity in its full sense was never part of the plan. In the Mexican Revolution, José María Morelos declaimed in 1813:

Spirits of Moctehuzoma, Cacamatzin, Cuauhtimotzin, Xicotencatl and Catzonzi, as once you celebrated the feat in which you were slaughtered by the treacherous sword of Alvarado, now celebrate the happy moment in which your sons have united to avenge the crimes and outrages committed against you...²

Nevertheless in the next generation, by the Lerdo Law of 1856, communal rights of Indians to their lands – which had been sustained during three centuries of Spanish rule – were dissolved, paving the way for the break-up of traditional communities and the much more pervasive use of Spanish throughout the country.

In a few cases, the fading imperial powers seem even to have tried to ally with indigenous communities in order to balance and suppress urban elites. This reversion to the Roman tradition of *DIVIDE ET IMPERA* (“divide and rule”) had disastrous consequences for those communities when the imperial powers were forced to withdraw. So of North Africa in the 1950s, a scholar of Arabic writes:

In most studies of language choice, the position of Berber is hardly mentioned at all in spite of the fact that that a large majority of the population are bilingual in Arabic/Berber. The marginal position of Berber has to do with the effects of the French colonial period. In 1930 the French issued an edict (*daher berbère*) about the position of Berber, in which they put an end to the teaching of Arabic in Berber-speaking areas. Education in both French and Berber was promoted, and several measures were taken to create a distance between speakers of Berber and speakers of Arabic. Although there was never any evidence of actual collaboration with the French authorities, the association of the Berber cause with

French imperialism has remained strong both in Morocco and Algeria. In both countries, public support for Berber culture and language was strictly forbidden; in Algeria, all Berber publications were prohibited in 1976. The campaigns for arabicisation are no doubt also directed against the large number of Berber speakers, who had to send their children to Arabic schools. As a result, almost all Berber-speakers, except in remote regions of the Rif, are at least partly bilingual in Arabic and Berber.³

This unease with minority groups, from whatever cause, and the sense that assertion of their rights is hardly compatible with the strength of new states, is still a feature of modern post-imperial governments, even one might have conjectured that the new powers are strong, self-assured and even democratically-based. Consider for example this recent editorial opinion from Karnataka in South India:

The Government Order had stipulated that in areas where the population of linguistic minorities constituted a minimum 15 per cent of the total population, government notifications, orders and rules should also be issued in the language of the said minorities. It could have been Marathi in Belgaum, Tulu/ Konkani in Mangalore, Telugu in Bidar, Kodava in Kodagu...

Viewed through the prism of an ordinary common man in these places, the GO could have been construed as a patently progressive move, and one that behoves an increasingly cosmopolitan State. By making arcane government notifications available in their tongue, it could have been argued that the government was empowering the very people who had put it there...

However, a host of Kannada writers and activists, and the Kannada Development Authority (KDA), urged the government to withdraw the move. They feared that the GO would go against the spirit of Statehood of Karnataka, and might spoil the harmony between Kannadigas (*viz.* Kannada-speakers) and linguistic minorities. There is merit in their argument.⁴

This argumentation is quite revealing of current changes in public opinion worldwide. After the first generation had digested the gains of Independence, it soon became clear that new elites had become dominant. Since the populations had long been used to elite government, this did not at first lead to calls for change; but later, as prosperity and general levels of education have increased, greater demands for general emancipation have begun to be heard. This trend has naturally been reinforced by the increasing reach of, and affordability of access to, the mass media, for some time in broadcasting, but now even in electronic networking. Knowledge of what is available now extends beyond the first-generation elites, and the majority communities from which they come, to wider and wider sections of society. Effectively, one can say that Global Media more and more allow Global Awakening.

One is tempted to add that we may also be seeing the start of a process of alienation from “World” culture, i.e. the common round of TV, music, film, sports and advertising, that is

most easily and immediately spread by globalized media, most originating in the USA but also (especially for music and sports) in Western Europe. Little by little, the “narrowcasting” potential of newer, purely electronic, media is becoming evident. As newly affluent, and hence self-confident, members of a world community begin to sense the absence of their own contribution to what is on offer, they will find ways of taking more local control. In these conditions, it is increasingly difficult for global cultural empires to last. And (as the Morelos quote above shows), it is often indigenous cultures that give out the most direct sign of local character.

New Emphasis on Empowerment: but What is Needed in order to “Do it Yourselves” ?

Whatever the underlying causes of this new trend, new policies are becoming required to make the voices of these newly asserted local cultures vibrant and effective. This is the meaning of “The Defence of Diversity” in my title. Since the emphasis is now on the assertion of local cultures — and especially, in our context, local languages — only in special cases, where there happen to be only one, or very few, languages to support, and strong local governments, can we expect centralized assistance. In Wales and New Zealand, efforts can be concentrated nationally behind Welsh and Māori; but this is just not possible in Australia, with 235 living languages to defend, or Brazil with 192, or the USA with 176.⁵ Even where states and provinces within these countries have strong regional autonomy, there are just too few of them. The general case can only be one of community empowerment, not state subsidy and control. Language communities will have to take action in their own defence, using whatever media may come to hand.

I suggest that in this new situation four different things are likely to prove crucial to building strong bases for so many small languages, ones that may prove resilient in the long term. These four things are:

1. Communications,
2. Know-How,
3. Funding, and
4. Morale.

The world — and the number of language communities in it — is vast, and I cannot begin to review a representative sample of how these needs are felt, and how answers to them are can be supplied. I hope I shall be forgiven if I concentrate on the inevitably tiny, but I hope representative, contribution that is being made by our own Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL).

Communications for Solidarity, Publicity

It is important that language defence programmes enjoy good communications with the outside world, for two main reasons. On the one hand, the programme will benefit from frequent contact with peer programmes in other regions, and perhaps other countries; defending a language can be a lonely, and sometimes discouraging, business, and links with other communities may be useful as a source of ideas, as well as solidarity. On the

other hand, every language support programme is of great value to others, simply in virtue of its existence. It deserves to be known, therefore, for the benefit of its peers, and to advertise to a wider world that one more small community is standing up and earning respect.

The kinds of communications that are available will be varied. Print media remain indispensable, creating records of the language, sometimes even monuments to it, while they communicate messages in it beyond an immediately present audience. But not all languages yet have an established writing system, and without one a community will face major challenges in developing a usable standard. Some of the problems are discussed, in a wide range of language environments, in two of our Proceedings volumes, FEL IV⁶ and FEL VI⁷.

Broadcast media are important both for the sending of information to wide audiences, but also because the existence of channels with regular broadcasts is a powerful advertisement that the language is an important fixture in the wider community. There are of course roles for all the paraphernalia of the Internet, such as web-sites, chat-rooms, e-mail, with video and audio recordings on tap; this is cheap (at least by comparison with establishing broadcast media) and costs continue to fall; furthermore, it may have particular attraction for the (all-important) younger generations. However, it needs to be supplemented with other means which promote direct human contact, since on its own it can lead its users to content themselves with a rather passive interactions, and web-sites tend to stand as monuments rather than scenes of constant activity. This is the subject of another of our volumes, FEL V⁸.

The Foundation for Endangered Languages has a thrice-yearly newsletter of its own, named for the Celtic god of eloquence *Ogmios*, and all the back numbers can be found at our web-site www.ogmios.org. Its main aim is to keep language revivalists worldwide in touch with one another's thoughts and achievements. FEL also aspires to bring them into direct contact, by organizing a series of conferences where people can discuss their experiences, identify problems and make recommendations. So far it has held seven of these conferences, in four continents, with an eighth to be held this year in Barcelona itself. Each conference is organized around a theme, not a region; and the attendance includes local experts from all over the world as well as western linguists, with the hope of building solidarity among small language communities.⁹

Know-How for Language Transmission

Although language transmission from one generation to the next, and indeed foreign language learning, have been going on as long as there have been human languages, there is now an urgent need for guidance on language teaching and language learning. In modern conditions, neither is straightforward. The higher level of mobility in modern societies almost everywhere; the greater penetration of broadcast media, usually in languages other than those of traditional communities; the sense, in some communities, that a traditional language is a burden, even if a precious one, which imposes responsibilities on a new generation that may not want to shoulder them — all pose special problems for the natural process of language acquisition.

Traditional communities often make the easy assumption that if some words of the language can be introduced into elementary schooling, language acquisition will be assured; in fact, language teaching in a school context is a highly difficult task, especially if the teachers are not themselves fluent speakers of the language.¹⁰ Nor is the availability of IT-based courses necessarily a major help, although they may give new words a more vivid context than has been possible in the static written teaching materials of the past.¹¹ Help is at hand in some new approaches to language teaching, often involving active participation by fluent members of the community, but there is still no “royal road” to learning a new language.¹²

Funding from NGOs as well as Governments: sources are starting to emerge

Inevitably, funding has emerged as a major issue in the defence of endangered languages. This is especially important where a small language community is not sustaining itself, and so there is significant danger of the language being lost in the next couple of generations. In this context, language documentation becomes a priority, and two major funds have been established in the last five years specifically to pay for activities which will result in full documentation — by video and audio as well as written records — of languages in such danger. These are the *Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Programme* (HRELP)¹³ in the UK, and the *Dokumentation bedrohter Sprachen* (DoBeS) programme of the Volkswagen-stiftung¹⁴ in Germany.

These are tightly focused programmes, targeting serious money on the documentation of specific languages in danger. Some national governments, notably those in the Netherlands¹⁵ and Japan¹⁶, have also set up funding programmes to support the extension of knowledge about endangered languages in general. Some smaller private funds also act to fund miscellaneous work aimed at the documentation, protection and promotion of these languages. Notable among them are

- The Endangered Language Fund, of New Haven, Connecticut¹⁷, and (once again)
- The Foundation for Endangered Languages, of Bath, England¹⁸.

By necessity, their grants remain very small, of the order of \$1,000: so even when such funds are available, the pattern of “Do It Yourself” is the only model for the actual work of encouragement and revitalization.

Nevertheless, the pattern of languages aided by FEL now covers the whole world.

... and Above All Morale

Beyond all these issues of practical resources, the most indispensable constituent of any programme to revitalize or defend a minority language is morale. The defence of diversity is a labour of love, and can only be undertaken by people who care about a language and the culture which it transmits.

Ultimately, this is not a problem that can ever be solved finally. All any generation of speakers can do is to strive to see that their language ends up as lively when they die as it

was when they were first introduced to it as children. Language survival only ever happens “one generation at a time”, and each new generation will have to take responsibility for the language’s future. As long as the cause of minority languages continues to attract the selfless labours of some speakers, or would-be speakers, the defence of diversity will continue. In the words of L. Frank Manríquez, an activist working to revitalize the extinct Tongva language of the Los Angeles area:

“How can it be hopeless, when there is so much hope?”

¹ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/census2001/Report_on_the_Welsh_language.pdf

² *Sentiments of the Nation*, quoted (in English) by King, Linda, 1994, *Roots of Identity: Language and Literacy in Mexico*, Stanford University Press, p. 57

³ Kees Versteegh: *The Arabic Language* (Edinburgh UP 1997, 2001), p. 205

⁴ *Star of Mysore*, May 2004: The article goes on, rather perversely: “It can be argued that the needs of the linguistic minorities are met by publication of notifications in English (SIC). But that only reaches the creamy layer, and the Krishna government’s bid to assuage the simmering discontent at the grassroots has come unstuck.”

⁵ Figures from SIL Ethnologue (2000).

⁶ *Endangered Languages and Literacy*, ed. Nicholas Ostler and Blair Rudes; Bath 2000

⁷ *Endangered Languages and their Literatures*, ed. R. McKenna Brown; Bath 2002

⁸ *Endangered Languages and the Media*, ed. Christopher Moseley, Nicholas Ostler, Hassan Ouzzate; Bath 2001

⁹ The full list, including the conference planned for this year, is:

1997 FEL I: York, England – First Steps in Language Rescue

1998 FEL II: Edinburgh, Scotland – Endangered Languages: What Role for the Specialist?

1999 FEL III: Maynooth, Ireland – Endangered Languages and Education

2000 FEL IV: Charlotte, North Carolina – Endangered Languages and Literacy

2001 FEL V: Agadir, Morocco – Endangered Languages and the Media

2002 FEL VI: Antigua, Guatemala – Endangered Languages and their Literatures

2003 FEL VII: Broome, Western Australia – Maintaining the Links: Language, Identity and the Land

2004 FEL VIII: Barcelona – On the Margins of Nations: Endangered Languages and Linguistic Rights

Volumes of proceedings are, or will be, available for all of them except the first. Contact the author of this article for details.

¹⁰ A variety of different situations are reviewed in *Endangered Languages and Education*, ed. Nicholas Ostler; Bath 1999

¹¹ A collection of recent applications of language technology to minority language teaching, in situations which vary from western Europe to North America and the Australian outback, can also be found at <http://lit.msu.edu/vol6num2/>

¹² See in particular the innovative techniques being explored in California. There is high-level discussion of a variety in Leanne Hinton and Ken Hale, ed. *The Green Book of Language Revitalization in Practice* (New York: Academic Press, 2001). More specific help and tips for communities will be found in Leanne Hinton (with Matt Vera and Nancy Steele) *How to Keep Your Language Alive* (Berkeley CA: Heyday Books, 2002).

¹³ <http://www.hrelp.org>

¹⁴ <http://www.volkswagen-stiftung.de>

¹⁵ NWO: Endangered Languages Research in the Netherlands

¹⁶ http://www.elpr.bun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/index_e

¹⁷ <http://www.ling.yale.edu/~elf>

¹⁸ <http://www.ogmios.org>