MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

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Summary

Equitable and affordable access to information remains one of the most challenging aspects in the use of global information networks such as the Internet. Information and communication technologies offer us increasingly performing services to enhance this access both in time and space. Nevertheless, technologies alone cannot resolve this issue. They need to be supplemented by economic, political, legal, ethical and societal measures which will encourage the creation of quality contents and reflect the cultural diversity of the world. The development of multilingualism on these networks is of critical importance for the achievement of this objective.

The paper describes some approaches UNESCO endeavors to promote in co-operation with its Member States, the private sector and the non-governmental organizations concerned, within her Programme "Information for All". It proposes a number of measures that should be undertaken in order to facilitate access to cultural and linguistic diversity on the global information networks.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNESCO is very pleased to participate in this World Congress on Language Policies and particularly in the workshop dedicated to the challenges of the new technologies and the development of linguistic resources, no doubt one of the major issues in the future evolution of the information society.

I should like to congratulate, on behalf of the Director-General of UNESCO, Mr Matsuura, the Institut Linguapax and the Government of Catalan for having taken the initiative to organize this venue, and this, at a time particularly appropriate for the implementation of an activity to which our Organization is given great attention: the promotion and use of multilingualism and universal access to cyberspace.

Introduction

UNESCO is committed to the principles of equality, justice and mutual respect in the access to information and knowledge. The Organization seeks to facilitate the entry of all nations into the Information Society; we are particularly concerned with issues that relate to the content of information available in the digital environment such as: access to and free flow of information; protection of privacy and confidentiality, security of data in all its forms, protection against cyber-crime and, of course, the promotion and use of multilingualism.

UNESCO considers indeed that the use and interoperability of different languages existing in the world is an important prerequisite for the provision of access to information for all on the global networks such as the Internet. Having the possibility to freely express yourself and communicate in your own language is a major factor in closing the digital gap between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the less so.

But multilingualism in cyberspace is not only a communication challenge. It also guarantees cultural diversity, one of the fundamental missions of UNESCO. It is our duty to generate, enrich and disseminate knowledge by opening access to digital opportunities to all, by developing freely accessible Websites in as many languages as possible e.g. sites containing public domain information, by creating tools that will facilitate their interoperability and by ensuring that the existing legal provisions in copyright agreements are preserved in the electronic environment.

Therefore, the diversity of languages on the Internet is necessary for two principal reasons: to provide equitable access to information for all people and to promote cultural diversity.

We note, however, that with the coming of the Information Society emerges a rapid globalization of the most important languages of the world, which by itself is a positive development, as it contributes to improve communication and information exchanges and transactions over space and time. It even opens interesting perspectives for the advancement not only of language teaching but also of knowledge. UNESCO intends to exploit to its maximum these new possibilities to assist the developing countries in accessing this knowledge.

Unfortunately, there is also the other side of the medal that is the risk of disappearance of a large number of languages in a relatively near future. The new technologies can only accelerate this trend, which exists already in the non-wired world, if one does not take measures so that thousands of other languages do not become extinct under the pressure of globalization and uniformization processes that we are witnessing today.

An expert on this matter, late Stephen Wurm, in his paper with the inspiring title " Endangered languages of the World" prepared for the Perez de Cuellar Commission already 7 years ago, in 1995, noted that many specialists throughout the world predict that some 90% of languages spoken today may disappear by the end of the 21st century. In my opinion, this is an over alarming perspective. In addition, one should not loose sight of the fact that at the same time new languages are emerging. But these statistics certainly show that the danger exists and there is now, today, a general decrease in linguistic diversity in the world.

This is not a new phenomenon. Thousands of languages have disappeared in the past, quite often with the death of the last person who spoke it, or because of natural or man-made catastrophe, or because of political and administrative regulations. For instance, in 1992, the language which held the world record by the number of consonants (81) - the Ubykh, a Caucasian language - disappeared with the passing away of the last Turkish peasant who spoke it. The difference today is that this phenomenon is increasing exponentially, particularly with the introduction of multimedia technologies of communication.

The language, as I said before, is first of all a vector, the best vector, for communicating our knowledge and our traditions. Fundamentally, all languages are equal as means for communication; unfortunately, they are often used as instrument for domination or division between the people. Their future often depends on the capacity to resist the assaults of languages from more aggressive or economically more powerful countries.

Each language of the some 6700 spoken today is a reflection of traditions, thoughts and cultures all unique in their essence. Any loss of language is a disappearance of a pool of knowledge and an impoverishment of our cultural heritage and research capacities. UNESCO cannot stay indifferent to this situation.

As rightly noted by the Sicilian poet Ignazio Buttitta "people become poor and slave when they are robbed of the language of their ancestors: they are lost for ever".

Today, one of the major challenges of the new technologies is to ascertain that the languages are not used to marginalize even more the people who for linguistic reasons cannot participate in information activities or even worse, are forced for the same reason to live in the shadow of dominant nations which by imposing their language also impose their cultural ideology and their ways and means of commercial, cultural and social transactions.

As Mr. Matsuura noted during the last Davos Summit, " if we wish that one day the knowledge society takes really its roots and gets implemented everywhere in the world, one should overcome the technical and commercial appeal of information and communication technologies and concentrate our efforts on the human dimensions of these societies". We need, among other ethical, legal and societal challenges to promote cultural and linguistic diversity of the contents accessible on the Internet; we need to prevent all forms of linguistic segregation; we need, finally, to safeguard the linguistic heritage of humanity.

The new technologies offer to us new opportunities in this field, even chances to reverse this alarming trend towards the extinction of languages. We should do everything possible to exploit these new means to the fullest extent possible both at the policy and practical levels.

It is in this context that UNESCO has taken up this challenge and has initiated for the past few years an action plan for the promotion and use of languages on the Internet that I wish to share with you today.

Information For All Programme

This action, based on the principle of "equitable access" to information, is since this year, embodied in the new UNESCO intergovernmental programme: "Information for All Programme". It rests on the objectives of the ECOSOC Resolution on "the role of IT in the context of a knowledge-based global economy" and the Millennium Assembly Declaration, thus contributing to the implementation of the commitments taken at the level of the United Nations system.

As a leading UN agency in this domain, UNESCO has first of all launched an initiative to take the debate on policy principles required for achieving equitable access to information and the promotion and use of multilingualism on the Net at the international level. UNESCO carried out a series of studies and international and national consultations on the ethical, legal and societal challenges of cyberspace (the INFOethics meetings) and is, at present, finalizing a Recommendation proposing measures on the promotion and use of multilingualism and universal access to information in cyberspace which will be submitted to the Member States of UNESCO for adoption next year. .

The Recommendation has three principal facets: 1) encourage the development of affordable access to technologies and services, 2) the production of a critical mass of quality information accessible freely or at an affordable price and 3) the use and interoperability of as many languages as possible on the Internet.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Facilitating access to technologies and services

The availability of publicly accessible networks and services is the first essential prerequisite to ensure that all citizens get access to information contents, in whatever language, on the Internet. Inequalities in access to these services are the most evident cause for disparities existing between the information " haves " and " have nots ", and between the developing and industrialized countries. The economic constraints to Internet connectivity and to access to telecommunication channels necessary for access to the Internet are particularly important for developing countries.

Many other factors limit this access as well: absence or insufficiencies of national policies on the implementation and use of information and communication technologies in public services, the severe discrepancies in terms of the technical and financial availability of services to rural and urban populations, particularly in developing countries with regard to basic commodities such as electricity and telephone services, administrative constraints on public service institutions wishing to participate in the information revolution, and to difficulties in obtaining Internet identifiers (Internet addresses, domain names) in many developing countries.

All these aspects of access to technologies are important factors limiting the participation of many sections of the population in many countries, industrialized and developing, in the promotion of their language and

their cultures on the Internet. The international community should recognize and support universal access to networks and services as a contemporary and appropriate interpretation of the human right as defined in Articles 19 and 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

UNESCO considers that for true "globalization" to really happen, and the cultural diversity to be fully expressed,

· the Internet should be promoted as a public information utility service and not only as a "commercial product".

· concerned international organizations should promote appropriate open technologies, the formulation and application of appropriate policies and regulations at the national, regional and international levels,

· mechanisms should be established to ensure that telecommunication and Internet costs facilitate universal access to the Internet and its multilingual contents.

· concessionary rates for Internet access in public service institutions such as schools, academic institutions, museums and public libraries should be considered as a transitional measure towards low-cost access to cyberspace,

· collaboration should be encouraged among public service institutions on information and communication technology, as a means of reducing the cost of access to telematics networks and services.

· the development of information strategies that facilitate community access and reach out to all levels of society should be considered.

· regional organizations should strengthen intra-regional networks, combining commercial and public service traffic.

Facilitating access through development of public domain contents

A significant amount of information lies in what is known as the public domain. This includes intellectual works, software that may be used without infringing the intellectual property rights provisions or breaching confidentiality. Such information may be subject to government or state/crown copyright, administered so as to ensure its use for the common goals of society. It includes works on which intellectual property rights have lapsed, anonymous works which are not considered the property of indigenous communities, ideas, meta-data (data on data) including catalogues of public libraries, official information produced and made available by government, and information made freely available by its author.

Since this enormous body of knowledge legacy exists in every country, every culture and every language, the facilitation of its digitization, provision and dissemination in local languages on the global information networks will substantially contribute to universal access and multilingualism. Though it is primarily the responsibility of public institutions such as libraries, archives, and governmental agencies to facilitate access to this type of information, the importance of private sector contributions and participation of the citizens themselves cannot be underestimated.

UNESCO's answer to this situation is the need to:

· establish a right of universal access,within their jurisdictions, to information relevant for citizens in a modern democratic society (laws and regulations, protection of citizens, health, public services, on-line governance information, etc),
· encourage national policies and legislative initiatives to facilitate freedom of information and on-line accessibility of public and government-held records as well as regulations on the digitization with appropriate security measures.
· identify at the national, regional and international levels, and for all cultural and linguistic communities, the repositories of information and knowledge in the public domain readily accessible by all,

· promote the creation of special funds to support the efforts of the developing countries to facilitate the promotion and use of multilingualism in cyberspace.

· support funding initiatives to enable public institutions to undertake the preservation and digitization of public domain information,

· develop and nurture "human capital" in the information society, including measures for open, integrated and intercultural education, as well as ICT skills training.

· find ways to assist communities to make the attitudinal changes required for ICT literacy, including building confidence in the implementation and use of ICTs.

· encourage co-operation between the different international governmental and non-governmental organizations with a view to building up a universally accessible multilingual body of knowledge,

· encourage the compilation of an international inventory of legislation, regulation, plans of action and programmes on the generation and dissemination of public domain

Promoting multilingual content and systems

But opening access to digital opportunities to all and expanding the availability of public domain information on the Net are not enough. It is also our duty to generate, enrich and disseminate knowledge by promoting multilingualism as such in cyberspace. As said before, language constitutes the foundation of communication between people; it is also part of their cultural heritage. For many people, language carries far-reaching emotive and cultural associations embedded in vast literary, historical, philosophical and educational heritage. It guarantees cultural diversity, one of the fundamental missions of UNESCO.

The issue is not the language itself. It is more the limits it puts to your capacity to communicate in an environment that claims to be universal. You cannot participate in on-line discussion groups. You cannot share knowledge about your culture. You cannot get information from other sources. Your economic progress is slowed down. Your culture is misinterpreted. Your children, forced to use a foreign language on the Net, are at risk, as some studies have shown, of losing their mother tongue. It is even realistic to foresee that entire languages will simply disappear. Where is then the diversity of the content on the Web?

A harmonious development of the information society is possible only by encouraging the availability of multilingual information. This availability is a critical issue. The absence of multilingual information may lead to the loss of native cultures.

Even in technologically developed countries where access to computers is relatively common, the level of training is high, and traditions seem to live pretty well in harmony with technological innovations, communications with the rest of the world can be severely limited because of a language barrier. This situation reaches extremes when it serves to exclude many users who, for instance, do not read Roman script.

UNESCO encourages the approach of promoting electronic translation and the development of norms, standards, legal instruments, principles and codes of conduct that will permit our Member States to have access to a much broader spectrum of languages and hence scope of knowledge.

It encourages in particular to,

· reaffirm and promote the respect and use of all languages in cyberspace,

· broaden language diversity in cyberspace by creating content, and the means to find, access and process such content, in all widely used languages as well as in other languages at the regional, national and local levels, including less used languages,

· alleviate language barriers in access to cultural and scientific information and to ensure the creation of national and multilingual Web sites,

· adopt strategies to develop, and disseminate on-line, freely accessible language education materials,

· encourage research and development on operating systems, search engines and Web browsers with extensive multilingual capabilities, as well as the development of on-line dictionaries and terminologies.

· support international cooperative efforts to develop automated translation services accessible to all, free or at a nominal charge,

· formulate strong national policies on the crucial issue of language survival in cyberspace,

· maintain and promote an international collaborative on-line observatory on the different existing policies and regulations relating to multilingualism and multilingual resources and applications.

Initiative B@bel

In support to this particular part of the Recommendation the Organisation has also initiated, with the approval of our governing bodies, the establishment of a trans-sectoral programme Initiative B@bel, which will implement in close cooperation with the Member States, the private sector and the competent international non-governmental organizations concrete activities aiming at promoting the use of languages and their access on the Internet.

It proposes to support action in three domains: (i) the formulation of policies to raise awareness on the issues of equitable access and multilingualism; (ii) the development and implementation of specific projects aimed to facilitate the interoperability and access of languages on the Net; and (iii) the worldwide dissemination of information on the state of the art in different countries.

Conclusion

Concluding, I wish to say creativity for all and the expression of our cultural and linguistic diversity, to which UNESCO is deeply committed, should be at the core of our preoccupations in the creation of the global digital environment. The preservation of and access to the richness and diversity of the linguistic and cultural human heritage, concepts enshrined in many international texts and national constitutions and legislations, should be reaffirmed as to their application in cyberspace.

Education in its fullest sense is the ultimate answer to the universal access to information, knowledge sharing and multilingualism. UNESCO believes then more than technologies, more than regulations, education will be the major factor for ensuring the installation of a fair, secure and liveable Information Society. Education is not professional training and development of technical skills only. Digital literacy is needed if we do not want to create a new form of illiterates, as it appears already with the exclusion of the elderly section of our populations.

What is needed even more is the development of cognitive education, allowing the users to recognize the new virtual and highly volatile environment they are working and living in. It is also, and most of all, the development of a new sense of civic behaviour where the principles of equality, justice and mutual respect prevail for all.

Nations decisions on these matters will determine whether they are part of the "globalization" process or out of it. Their active participation is needed to develop cultural diversity and multilingualism in cyberspace. The above actions, we are convinced, can contribute in helping them in this effort. But what is needed most is the political will to do so which UNESCO encourages its Member States to do.

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