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# UNESCO and Endangered languages

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## Abstract

### Short summary

### Introduction

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, has always had a keen interest in the question of languages, including multilingualism and endangered languages. Indeed, already its predecessor under the League of Nations, the *International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation* (IICI), strove to organize an international conference on *langues primitives en danger d'extinction*. This was prompted by a request from the first International Congress of Linguists in The Hague in 1928 to all governments and relevant bodies of the League of Nations *d'organiser une étude aussi complète que possible des langues et des dialectes de tous les pays dont ils ont la garde*. Due to misunderstandings between IICI and the *Comité International Permanent de Linguistes* (CIPL) this project was abandoned.

For us, it is interesting to compare the ideas and values that lay behind this early effort and those that fuel the work of UNESCO and the linguistic community 80 years later.

The words *langues primitives* strikes us of course as very inappropriate; to do justice to the inter bellum linguists, I should add that the President of CIPL at that time, Jos Schrijnen of Nijmegen University, already objected to this 'unscientific' epithet *primitive*.<sup>1</sup>

Both the request of the linguists and the plan for a conference from the IICI were exclusively *science driven*. The death of languages was first

<sup>1</sup> source: *Résumé d'un entretien de Mgr. Schrijnen, secrétaire permanent du congrès des linguistes avec MM. Zimmern et de Vos van Steenwijk* – 26/11/28 - IICI Archives at UNESCO - File DD.II.3

and foremost seen as a regretful loss of scientific data. The ideal of the linguists in The Hague was something like *Gilliéron's Atlas Linguistique de la France* on a global scale; the IICI should use its prestige with governments to back the appeal of the linguists for sufficient funding. Nowadays, both the linguistic community and UNESCO stress the central position of the *communities*. Nikolaus Himmelmann names as one of the five innovative features of the nascent discipline of 'documentary linguistics' the "close cooperation with and direct involvement of the speech community". He characterizes members of these communities as co-researchers<sup>2</sup>. Likewise UNESCO stresses that "actions only make sense if in the communities concerned there is a wide support for revitalization measures"<sup>3</sup>.

On the other hand, the sense of urgency that linguists feel today in the face of the massive language death existed already in these early times. Antoine Meillet, who took the initiative of the above mentioned request to the League of Nations, said: *le congrès ne devrait pas fermer ses portes sans avoir discuté un problème pratique de grande importance ; chaque jour il y*

<sup>2</sup> quoted in Peter K. Austin *Current Trends in Documenting Endangered Languages*, 2<sup>nd</sup> International Workshop NOW Endangered Languages Research Programme, Amsterdam, 7 September 2007, referring to Nikolaus Himmelmann *Language documentation: What is it and what is it good for?* In Jost Gippert, Nikolaus P. Himmelmann and Ulrike Mosel (eds.) 2006. *Essentials of Language Documentation* (Trends in Linguistics. Studies and Monographs, 178), 1-30. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

<sup>3</sup> Rieks Smeets *UNESCO Activities for Safeguarding Endangered Languages*, published on the website of the project *Endangered Languages of Indigenous Peoples of Siberia*: <http://lingsib.unesco.ru/en/articles/smeets.shtml.htm>

*a des langues qui meurent ou qui changent.*<sup>4</sup> This was as true in 1928 as it is in 2008.

## Current UNESCO activities

UNESCO's activities for languages are undertaken in all the Sectors of the Organization: Education, Social & Human Sciences, Culture and Communication & Information.

In recent years, the interest in language issues has markedly risen: a Task Force for Languages and Multilingualism, chaired by Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura, was created in 2006 in order to ensure that the issue of languages is embedded effectively within the work of all Sectors and to identify new strategic orientations. It published a mid-term strategy (2008-2013). This document identifies two main strategic intersectoral axes: "by promoting linguistic diversity and multilingualism, UNESCO will contribute, on the one hand to **cultural diversity and dialogue** and, on the other hand, to **consolidating the role of culture in development strategies.**"<sup>5</sup> The coordination of programmes related to languages and multilingualism lies with the Culture Sector "given the cultural nature of the linguistic phenomenon".<sup>6</sup>

As is usual in this kind of documents, the Strategy sketches the goals and the policy principles behind it in a rather abstract way. In order to show what is done in practice, I will very briefly describe some recent activities of various size and impact. Much information on such projects can be found at UNESCO's website. I will limit myself here to activities for endangered languages.

### ***Publication of the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing.***

The third edition of this publication is planned to appear at the end of this year. As part of the preparation, an expert meeting on linguistic cartography was held in 2007. The two earlier

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<sup>4</sup> Actes du premier congrès international de linguistes à La Haye, du 10-15 avril 1928 / (comité de réd.: C. de Boer, Jac. van Ginneken, A.G. van Hamel) Leiden : Sijthoff, 1930.

<sup>5</sup> 176 EX/INF. 15 Report by the Director-General on the execution of the programme adopted by the General Conference – Intersectoral mid-term strategy on languages and multilingualism; 5 April 2007, page 2.  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001503/150335E.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Idem, page 4.

editions (1996 and 2001, edited by Stephen Wurm) have done a lot to raise awareness about endangered languages. The new edition will contain more data and will be truly global. An on-line version of the new Atlas is also foreseen.

### ***Register of Good Practices in Language Preservation***

UNESCO wants to facilitate the sharing of good practices from all over the world. To do this, it issued a call for submission of examples of community-based projects in language preservation in 2005. At this moment, only a small number of projects have been made available on the website<sup>7</sup>, but the Secretariat is planning to add to the register in the future.

### ***Preliminary Research on Minority Languages in Cambodia***

The research was carried out in 2007 under auspices of the UNESCO Field Office in Phnom Penh. It resulted in an up-to-date description of the situation of minority languages in the country. On the basis of the publication, the Phnom Penh Field Office envisages more targeted activities on community development amongst some of Cambodia's minorities.

### ***Revitalization of a disappearing Southern Khoesan Language, N|u of the #Khomani Community***

In cooperation with the Department of Linguistics of the University of Namibia, UNESCO helps a village in its efforts to pass the traditional languages, spoken by only 8 elderly people, to the youth of the community. The projects includes the development of an orthography and training of community members in working with computers and audiovisual equipment.

### ***2008 UN Year of Languages***

On 16 May 2007, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2008 to be the International Year of Languages<sup>8</sup>. UNESCO has been named the lead agency for this event. It is another indication of the interest that exists, also in other places in the UN-systems than UNESCO, for languages and multilingualism. In the framework of this Year, UNESCO has devoted a whole issue of the UNESCO Courier

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[http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00145&categ=04#menu\\_onglet](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00145&categ=04#menu_onglet)

<sup>8</sup> See the relevant page on UNESCO's website: [http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=35344&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=35344&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

to languages, celebrated International Mother Language Day (21 February) with more emphasis than usual and established an on-line list of relevant projects. The list contains presently 170 projects, 29 of which are connected to endangered languages. During the 180<sup>th</sup> Executive Board a thematic debate will be held with the title “Protecting Indigenous and Endangered Languages and the Role of Languages in Promoting Education for All in the Context of Sustainable Development”.<sup>9</sup>

### **Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage & endangered languages**

The activities presented so far are examples of UNESCO's role as a catalyst of ideas, a disseminator of good practices and a capacity builder. But the Organization is also a standard setter. Especially in the Culture Sector, UNESCO has developed some conventions – juridical instruments with a binding character – that attract a lot of attention from governments, specialists and the public at large.

Of the existing UNESCO instruments, the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage is the most relevant. This Convention, adopted in 2003 and in force since 2006 has been ratified by 97 countries (figure from June 2008). This Convention is the younger sister of the World Heritage Convention (1972) with its well known World Heritage List. Languages as such are not named in the (not exhaustive) list of domains of intangible cultural heritage, but ‘oral traditions and expression’ are listed. This means that a language in itself cannot be said to be protected by the Convention, but heritage that uses a language as its vehicle is protected. In the process of drafting this Convention, some countries objected to including languages as such, presumably out of fear that this might fuel separatist tendencies of minorities.

Because both the Convention and the activities for endangered languages fall under the same Intangible Cultural Heritage Section in the UNESCO Secretariat, the ties between the Convention and the Endangered Languages

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<sup>9</sup> See back ground document 180 EX/INF.8 Thematic Debate: Protecting Indigenous and Endangered Languages and the Role of Languages in Promoting Education for All in the Context of Sustainable Development, 21 July 2008:  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001614/161495e.pdf>

Programme are very close. These things are impossible to prove, but I think that the increased attention for endangered languages, is to a large extent provoked by the enthusiasm with which the concept intangible heritage has been received up by scholars and decision makers worldwide.

### **Towards a Convention for Endangered Languages?**

At the 176<sup>th</sup> Executive Board (May 2007) Venezuela made a proposal to set up a Convention for indigenous and endangered languages<sup>10</sup>. Various Member States proved to be in favor of this idea, and the Board requested the Director-General to undertake a “preliminary study of the technical and legal aspects of a possible international standard setting instrument for the protection of indigenous and endangered languages”<sup>11</sup>. At the 179<sup>th</sup> Executive Board only a basic outline of the preliminary report could be presented<sup>12</sup>, because extra budgetary funding for an expert meeting had not been found. The Secretariat will inform the Executive Board on progress at the 180<sup>th</sup> Executive Board (September/October 2008), but it looks as if the message will be the same.<sup>13</sup> The road towards a

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<sup>10</sup> 176 EX/59 Preparation of a Convention for the Protection of Indigenous and Endangered Languages, 12 April 2007:  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001503/150360E.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> See 176 EX/Decision 59: “The Executive Board [...] requests the Director-General to conduct a preliminary study of the technical and legal aspects of a possible international standard-setting instrument for the protection of indigenous and endangered languages, including a study of the outcomes of the programmes implemented by UNESCO relating to this issue, and to submit such a preliminary study to the Executive Board for examination at its 179<sup>th</sup> session; invites the Director-General to convene a meeting of experts, including representatives of indigenous peoples, to assist him in the preparation of such a preliminary study, and to seek extra budgetary funding for it.”.  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001508/150871E.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> See 179 EX/10 Report by the Director-General on a Preliminary Study of the Technical and Legal Aspects of a Possible International Standard-Setting Instrument for the Protection of Indigenous and Endangered Languages, including a Study of the Outcomes from the Programmes Implemented by UNESCO related to this Issue (28.03.08).  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001586/158619e.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> The report of the Director-General has already been published. It makes clear that

new UNESCO convention is always long and beset with difficulties, but the lack of progress in this case, at the very beginning of the process, doesn't augur well.

Lack of enthusiasm doesn't automatically mean that the UNESCO Secretariat or the Member States have lost interest in the subject of endangered languages. For example, opposition can issue from the opinion that after the adoption of the Conventions for Intangible Heritage in 2003 and for Cultural Diversity in 2005, UNESCO should refrain from new standard setting initiatives for a while and focus efforts on ratification and implementation of existing instruments.

Should the Foundation for Endangered Languages wish for a separate Convention for Endangered Languages, or should it be content under the umbrella of Intangible Heritage (and possibly canvass for revision of the text<sup>14</sup> by the General Assembly of State Parties in order to give languages an unambiguous place in the Convention)? A Convention 'of our own' can create a lot of attention for endangered languages, but judging from the process so far, there is reason to fear that this instrument will not generate the amount of continued support from Member States required to turn it into a vital platform for action and discussion. If this is indeed the case, then the pragmatic option to work for endangered languages in the more general framework of Intangible Heritage is clearly to be preferred.

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extrabudgetary funding, although pledged, has not been provided, so that the meeting, scheduled for the first week of September 2008, will in all probability not be held. See: 180 EX/11 Report by the Director-General on a Preliminary Study of the Technical and Legal Aspects of a Possible International Standard-Setting Instrument for the Protection of Indigenous and Endangered Languages (21 July 2008)

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001612/161299e.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Very difficult in practice, as this requires the agreement of all Parties to the Convention.