

What do we do with an International Year of Languages?

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The news that there was to be an International Year of Languages in 2008 was received with great acclaim around the linguistic world - once they heard about it! I saw no announcement in the press, and was only told about it the next day by my friends here in Linguapax. As soon as I heard the news, I reported it in my blog, and sent messages to the main language organizations with which I am in contact, such as the Foundation for Endangered Languages and the British Academy. They had not heard about it either. And as far as the general public is concerned, there was also total ignorance - and still is. I lecture to audiences most weeks, and recently I have been asking some of them if they had heard of IYL 08. None of them have.

We must be realistic, therefore, when we ask ourselves the question 'What do we do with an International Year of Languages?' These Years are an excellent idea, but they are evidently not being promoted in a way that makes them unmissable and unforgettable. Think back. How many do you remember? What was the Year in 2005? Physics. 2004? Rice. 2002? Mountains. I had to look them up - and even that took quite a search, for there is no convenient list of International Years - at least, none that comes up quickly on Google.

Another complication is that for each chronological year there is not one but several UN Years. I do not know how such things come to be, but in 2008 our Languages Year is in competition. Next year is also the International Year of Sanitation, the International Year of the Reef, the International Year of Planet Earth, and the International Year of the Potato. I mean it when I say 'competition'. Human beings are able to take in only so much information, and are willing and able to devote attention, time, and money to only a tiny number of the laudable projects that are placed before them. So why should they pay attention to language, especially when there is a much more obvious and pressing cause to attend to? Planet Earth! It is this theme which will grab all the attention of the media, unless we are clever.

So how are we to be clever? The first thing we must do is understand how people think of language. And here the main point is that language is so natural and unconscious a phenomenon that people do not think of it. They take it for granted. They only notice it when it starts to go wrong (such as when they fail to understand something, and talk of jargon and plain speaking) or it starts to intrude in some way (such as encountering a spelling error - in English it is often a misplaced apostrophe - thank goodness next year was not called the International Year of Potatoes, for it would have been widely reported as Potato's). The point applies as much to multilingualism as monolingualism. Unless there is a conflict of some kind, bilingual people take their ability very much for granted.

Once the amazing phenomenon of language has been drawn to people's attention, of course, they are invariably fascinated by it. I have spent most of my life telling stories about language, and I have never met an audience that does not relate to them. The reason is simple. They can relate to a point of linguistic interest in their own language because they have already mastered the skill being discussed. They already 'own' that language, and are thus able - once motivated to do so - to talk about their own linguistic experiences without tuition. Everyone has an accent, a dialect, a favourite word, a pet linguistic hate, an interesting language story to tell. And it takes hardly any pressure at all to make them come forward and tell it.

Here is an example of how it happens. Earlier this year I published a book called *By Hook and By Crook*, whose subtitle is *A Journey in Search of English*. It is a linguistic travelogue, exploring various parts of the English-speaking world in search of interesting features of language, such as place-names, regional accents, and idiosyncratic language customs. Such a journey could be made in any language. One of the things I encountered was the habit of naming objects in a household - people have a pet name for a car, or a washing machine. I have in this way learned of a wheelbarrow called Wilberforce and a teapot called

Herbie, and a hundred other named artefacts. Since the book came out, I have been giving a talk based upon it at various literary festivals in the UK. And after every talk, people tell me, often in a surreptitious tone of voice, stories about their own favourite names. I do not think this is a purely Anglo-Saxon thing. I have examples from French and German and Czech - and today I have no doubt that later I will be given examples from Catalan and Spanish. Once people notice a linguistic issue, they take it on board and use it to explore their own intuitions and experiences. That is what I mean when I talk of people 'owning' their language.

My point, then, is that people do not think about language until they have their attention drawn to it. Then they become excited. So, in the context of an International Year of Languages, the question becomes: how do we draw people's attention to it? How can we excite them? There are several ways, some direct, some indirect.

Let me begin with the indirect. There is a proverb in English: 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.' Perhaps we can benefit from the presence of the other Years scheduled for 2008. Is there a complementarity rather than a conflict of interest? I think there is. What do humans need to survive? A viable environment. Drinkable water. Food. Three prerequisites, indeed, identified here through the focus on Planet Earth, Sanitation, and the Potato. But the fourth prerequisite for humanity, to my mind, is Language. Once human beings have the means to exist, then they must co-exist. And co-existence as humans is possible only through language.

The similarities between biological and linguistic needs have long been recognized in the literature on diversity. It has often been pointed out by commentators on evolution that one of the factors accounting for the success of the human race has been its ability to adapt itself to the widely varying physical environments on the planet. The point applies as much to cultural as to biological environments. In a holistic conception of an ecosystem, cultural and biological domains are brought into a mutually reinforcing relationship; damage to any one of the elements can result in unforeseen consequences for the system as a whole. And if diversity is a prerequisite for successful humanity, then the preservation of linguistic diversity is essential, for language lies at the heart of what it means to be human. If the development of multiple cultures is so important, then the role of languages becomes critical, for cultures are chiefly transmitted through spoken and written language. We do not have to insist on an absolute parallel between biological and linguistic ecology, simply a synergy.

So it seems to me that one of the things we have to do, as linguists and language lovers, is associate ourselves firmly with the ecological movement that lies behind Planet Earth. Linguistic initiatives need to signpost ecological dangers. Ecological initiatives need to signpost linguistic dangers. We need to build up in the mind of the public the association between the two. To take three famous slogans of recent years. 'Think Green? Think Language.' 'Save the Earth? Save a Language.' 'Use It or Lose It. Be Multilingual.'

Carpe annum. We have to seize the year. We have to make it - at least partly - ours. We have to make people see the point of linguistic diversity. We must not ignore the fact that many people do not see it. I am not talking about apathy here, but active antagonism. Here is a view expressed in the pages of *Quest*, the journal of the Queen's English Society in the UK, only this month. Talking about the views I represent on linguistic diversity, the commentator asks 'do we really need it?' [diversity], and answers his own question with 'quite the contrary'. He goes on to say that 'man has been able to place himself in the most diverse of environments ... using only a handful of languages' - thereby, of course, ignoring the several thousand languages that have actually played a part in the development of the planet. Few of these languages he holds to be valuable: 'when a language dies, what really is lost? Surely something is in fact gained if the speaker decides to drop, say, Karas and adopts English instead?' The ignorance of the expressive richness of other languages is truly breathtaking, but it is only to be expected from someone who affirms 'the superior quality of the content of the English language'. This kind of nonsense is only to be expected from organizations which have a narrow-minded and elitist view of what counts as 'good English' - or 'good French', or 'good Spanish', or whatever. But it exists, I suspect in all cultures where a language has a strong written literary tradition, and it has to be firmly countered. This is where UN statements have a particularly important role to play.

Language is unique in this respect. I do not think we would find people being antagonistic to the motivation which has led to our having 2008 as the Year of the Sanitation or of the Potato, but there are evidently those who will be unsympathetic to the motivation for a Year of Languages. The view that the world would be a better place if there were only one language - always, of course, the language of the person expounding the point - is still remarkably widespread. I would love to place members of the Queen's English Society in a room with members of the French Academie and see them tear each other to pieces over the point about 'quality of content'. Of course, they would only be able to do this, each group insistently using its own language, if they were all bilingual, or had a bilingual interpreter available.

The intellectual health of the planet is dependent on multilingualism. Without exposure to the alternative visions of the world expressed by other languages, our view of ourselves and of our planet remains inward-looking, unchallenged, and parochial. As George Steiner said, it is only by learning another language that we 'experience the defining contours' of our own. The point can be expressed in cultural terms. It is only by experiencing another culture - whether at home or abroad - that we discover the defining contours of our own. That is why it is important for the UN to affirm, and to keep affirming, the principle of linguistic diversity as a basic human good. It fosters an intellectual and emotional climate in which triumphalist language attitudes and organizations will feel increasingly uncomfortable and outmoded. Great progress has already been made with relation to racism. Antagonism to linguistic diversity is a first cousin of racism.

The UN Resolution 61/185 of 16 May 2007 announcing the International Year of Languages is an important reaffirmation of the basic principle of linguistic diversity. But if we turn to it hoping to find guidance about how we should all be exploiting the Year, to achieve the above aims, we receive little help. The Resolution has 33 operative clauses or sub-clauses. Five of them (1, 25-8) are to do with organizational matters. And of the remaining 28, a remarkable total of 25 are to do with the language situation within the UN itself. It is the UN putting its own linguistic house in order, recommending parity among the six official languages, and identifying ways in which the UN operation can be improved - mainly, it would seem, by keeping English on a tight rein. The proposals are sometimes very specific. For example, OP14.4 reads:

Takes note of the fact that the multilingual development and enrichment of the United Nations website has improved, although at a slower rate than expected owing to constraints that need to be addressed, and, in this regard, requests the Department of Public Information, in coordination with content-providing offices, to improve the actions taken to achieve parity among the six official languages on the United Nations website, in particular through expediting the filling of current vacant posts in some sections.

I don't want to criticize this in any way. It is important that these things happen. But I do want to ask: in what way is this proposal, and the 24 others like it, going to grasp the imaginations of the world public, and get people to see the point of what an International Year of Languages is all about? Is the Year primarily to do with improving the internal operation of the UN? If so, then the answer to the title of my paper, with new emphasis - 'What do we do with an International year of Languages? - is: nothing. For there is no way on this earth that I personally can make any direct contribution to the task of achieving language parity within the UN, or expedite the filling of vacant posts - and I imagine most people are in my position.

Just three clauses seem to be directed at people outside the UN: 23, 24, 25.

OP 23 affirms that 'linguistic diversity is an important element of cultural diversity'.

OP 24 reaffirms that 21 February should be proclaimed "International Mother Language Day", and calls upon Member States and the Secretariat to promote the preservation and protection of all languages

OP 25 announces the International Year, and asks us all 'to develop, support and intensify activities aimed at fostering respect for and the promotion and protection of all languages (in particular endangered languages), linguistic diversity and multilingualism'.

Once we eliminate the repeated elements in these three clauses, we find there is not much to go on. The reference to Mother Language Day is not new, for we have been recognizing 21 February since the year 2000. We are given just three points of content:

linguistic diversity - an important element of cultural diversity
all languages - especially endangered languages
multilingualism

We might have expected something comparably specific to OP 14, quoted above; but there is nothing. The advice is very general: respect, promote, preserve, and protect. And we are told to get out there and do something: develop, support, intensify our activities.

We urgently need to operationalize these laudable aims. In any business plan, we would be expected to identify specific targets or outcomes. Doubtless many organizations around the world are doing this as I speak, and planning specific activities which will have a local impact - in much the same way as many fine initiatives emerged during the European Year of Languages in 2001. But today I am talking about the UN, not about individual countries. What initiatives would make a permanent impact on the consciousness of the human race as a whole, so that it would never forget the important role languages play in its wellbeing?

This is the critical aim. Ultimately most things linguists do are dependent on public approval. Somebody has to pay for documentation, revitalization, maintaining diversity - organizations or individuals (philanthropists, policy-makers, political purse-holders) who need to be persuaded that their investment is worthwhile. But public approval presupposes public attention. So how are we to gain it? I am a great believer in copying the successes of others. How have other enterprises behaved when faced with the problem of how to grab the attention of the public? I have been looking at the way other domains do it, and have noted five main ways in which they regularly make an impact. The linguistic community does only two of these, and even those in a very limited way. I shall look at these two first, briefly, and spend more time on the remaining three.

1 Celebratory Days. Religions have festivals, countries have national days, families have days for mothers, fathers, and more. There is Halloween, Shakespeare's Birthday, Bastille Day. We have done the same. We have World Languages Day and World Mother Language Day. But establishing a day is not enough. We have to ask: how do we celebrate it? And how do others celebrate their days? With parades, displays, dressing up, badges, cards, presents. This is something which, at an international level, we do not do. I am not suggesting we should all be here today in fancy dress. But there are other ways. Take cards. I would love to send a card to friends for World Languages Day. I do not know of any. Or, even easier - send an e-card. I do not know of any. I would love to send a Save Endangered Languages Christmas card - after all, most of us would be hard-pressed to understand Eashoa Msheekha (Jesus Christ) if he returned speaking his mother-tongue, Aramaic. Listen to <http://www.v-a.com/bible/prayer.html> and see. Or take displays. I am not talking of firework displays, but something more subtle. In early September Google had a special design for its logo in honour of Roald Dahl's birthday. Why not a display for the Language Days? Google could not exist without language.

2 Locations to visit. If you are interested in science, you can visit a science museum. Plants and animals, a natural history museum. Painting, an art gallery. In London there are over 300 major exhibition centres which keep their subject-matter in front of the public - textiles, transport, maritime, musical instruments, dolls... But for languages there is nothing, in country after country, other than the occasional local institute devoted to a single language,

and even that is unusual. Even English does not have such a place to visit, though one is planned for Winchester in 2012. The first such physical location devoted to languages in general, as everyone here knows, will be the Casa de les Llengües in Barcelona. It needs to be followed by others. And already-existing places need to mount languages exhibitions - in much the way that the Barcelona Forum did in 2004. These are very rare events. They should be routine.

3 Awards. How does literature become front-page news? Or painting? Or film? Or economics? Or peace? Or physiology? Or physics? Or chemistry? You will perceive from my examples that I am thinking prizes, awards, medals - most famously, the Nobel prizes, which account for five of those cases. There is the huge Templeton prize for progress in religion. Several countries do their own thing. The UK has its Turner Prize for contemporary art. France has its Prix Goncourt. Spain has its Cervantes Prize. In the US, there are no less than 21 categories of Pulitzer Prize. In fact, if you go collecting annual or biennial prizes, medals, and awards on topics of international concern you will find over 600 - and that figure excludes subcategories of topics (such as Children's Literature).

Something interesting happens if you make a summary list of all the prizes. Here is one such list (see Table 1). It is from Wikipedia, and therefore not to be trusted. Indeed, Wiki itself tells you not to trust it. As it says at the top: 'This list may require cleanup to meet Wikipedia's quality [sic] standards!' But it's handy, nonetheless, because it shows up something interesting. I mapped it against all the higher-level thematic domains covered in *The Penguin Encyclopedia*. Every thematic domain has a prize of some sort - except one. No prizes for guessing which domain that is.

The Wiki list actually omits the one language prize I know of, the Linguapax Award, given for outstanding work in the field of language diversity and multilingual education. And there are also a few small awards in specific areas of our subject, such as language teaching and translation. Why aren't there more, and why aren't there any really famous ones, well known outside of the profession? Why have language and languages been so neglected? Perhaps it is something to do with the time-lag between the time when a topic develops and the time when it comes to public consciousness. It is usually a couple of decades. For example, environmental studies, video games, and feminism emerged in the late 1960s / early 70s. And two decades later, we find the first Goldman Environmental Prize (1990), the first Orange Prize for fiction written by women (1996), and the first Interactive Achievement Award for video games (1998). Or again: computing as most people understand it is a product of the 1980s. And two decades later we find the first Microsoft European Science Award (Royal Society and the Académie des Sciences) for the advancement of science through computational methods (2006), or, to take another domain, the first prize for digital literature, established by the Ciutat de Vinarós in 2005. So, two decades. On the other hand, with an exciting new development, it might take only five years: the Webby Awards for the world's best websites arrived very speedily in 1996 - a mere five years after the World Wide Web was devised by Tim Berners Lee.

When would we date the emergence of the present concern over language diversity and endangerment? I would say the early 1990s. Specifically, 1992, when the crisis affecting the world's endangered languages was first brought to the attention of the world's linguists. Three years later we had the UNESCO Red Book and the establishment of the Foundation for Endangered Languages, then Linguapax in 1997, and much more. So, all else being equal, with the above time scales we might not expect to see Language prizes much before 2015. That Linguapax started one in 2002 shows that all else is never equal. But it is a minnow in the prizes ocean, for most popular topics attract at least a dozen prizes.

The neglect of language is even more remarkable when we consider some of the things that prizes *are* given for. In science fiction, there are a dozen or more awards, including the Sidewise Award for Alternate History. Comic books also have over a dozen awards, such as the Shazam Awards. There is a Pipe Smoker of the Year Award and a Bad Sex in Fiction Award. And the only awards that relate to language that get onto the front pages of newspapers, as far as I know, are the annual awards for unclear English usage

awarded by the Plain English Campaign in the UK - the Golden Bull and Foot in Mouth awards - and the less known Crystal Mark (not named after me, I hasten to add) for clear usage, which hardly ever attracts headlines. Journalists seem only to be interested in the bad news. This seems to me to be the crowning irony - that a language is given more public recognition for its failures rather than for its successes.

The value of an award is not its monetary value, which can be quite low, or even non-existent. Nor is it the value for an individual, for awards are often given to groups and institutions. Its value is threefold: it provides professional recognition to an individual or institution, it provides motivation for action to that person's or institution's peers, and it provides an opportunity for publicity for the subject that the prize-winner professes. Prizes keeps a topic in front of the public's attention, year after year. And not just once a year, but every time the recipient is mentioned. Look at the way journalists deal with them. Write-ups do not say 'director Ang Lee' but 'Oscar-winning director Ang Lee...'. They do not say 'economist Gary Becker' but Nobel prize-winning economist Gary Becker. The attribution is significant: it transforms a name from someone one might not know about (if one is not a specialist) into someone that one *should* know about. And it identifies subjects - areas of knowledge - that one feels one should know about. We need to get language in general, and multilingualism in particular, into that position.

Another interesting point about major prizes is that their names enter everyday language in new uses, once they gets established in people's consciousness. People say things like 'He deserves an Oscar' or 'She deserves a Nobel pize' for special prowess in doing something that is actually quite mundane, such as washing a large pile of dirty dishes or mowing a badly kept lawn. Might we one day be saying 'He deserves a XXXX prize' for someone who impresses us all with his brilliant use of language? That would show we have really reached the general public.

Where do prizes come from? They are given by institutions, such as the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences or the UK's Royal Society. And they are given by individuals, such as Alfred Nobel or Sir John Marks Templeton. Often the two come together: an individual is persuaded by an institution to establish a prize. Surely UNESCO could persuade one of the world's leading philanthropists to establish a language prize, at the level of Nobel or Templeton? After all, without language, these other domains of knowledge could not function.

4. Artworks. How do we remember someone or some event? We build a monument or statue: think Nelson. We write a play: think *Henry V*. We write a piece of music: think *1812*. We paint a picture: think Picasso's *Guernica*. We make a film: think *Amistad*. I could go through the whole range of the arts and point to the artworks which commemorate, and thereby keep a topic in the forefront of our minds. I have presented this part of my argument before (my keynote paper to the UNESCO experts meeting on endangered languages in 2004), so I will not spend much space on it here, other than to note that the final summary document did include a reference to the importance of art. But the point, although recognized in theory, remains neglected in practice. For where are the artworks devoted to language and to languages?

I am not of course talking about the individual works which have been composed or constructed to celebrate an individual language. I can think of several poems and folk-songs which celebrate the Welsh language, for example, and doubtless there are similar compositions in Catalan and many other (perhaps most) languages. I am talking about commemorations of language in general, languages, language diversity, multilingualism. Why do not such things exist? If Godfrey Reggio can make three films and Philip Glass can write three associated suites to focus our minds on cultural diversity and alternative ways of life (*Koyaanisqatsi*, *Powaqqatsi*, *Naqoyqatsi*), why cannot someone (they?) do the same in honour of linguistic diversity? If I were in charge of the International Year of Languages, I would use my budget to commission a major artwork on the theme of language diversity, or I would find a private organization or individual to do it for me. And, being really forward-

thinking, I would ensure that this was a yearly commission, with a different art-form every year - literature, film, painting, music, dance, etc.

5. Reliable Data. But I would not use my whole budget on it. For there has to be a task, in any UN Year, which engages the mind, rather than the heart. And what should this be, for 2008? What is the most urgent task facing us? It is not, to my mind, the discovery of new information (as in the documentation of previously undocumented languages) but the correcting of misleading information about already documented languages. I do not mean deliberately misleading, but information which is simply out of date because people have not had the time or resources to update. We seriously underestimate the amount of updating that needs to be done. It is critical because we all rely on it, usually without thinking. If challenged, we think 'faute de mieux'. There is nothing better. But that is no answer.

As an illustration, let me take the most widely used source of demographic linguistic data that we have, *Ethnologue*. Its influence is considerable, for it is used as the primary source of data by marketing organizations (such as Global Reach) wanting information about the number of languages and the amount of representation of each language on the Internet. Most language estimates in Wikipedia also use it. I use it all the time, *faute de mieux*, and nothing I am about to say in this paper lessens my admiration for the amount of excellent work that has gone into this project since its inception in 1951. But with a staff of only three, it is obviously under-resourced. And as a result, it is seriously deficient. In a report submitted last year to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, John Paolillo and Anupam Das took a random sample of 2001 entries for population data from the 2005 edition and found that a surprising 52.4% had sources before 1996; moreover, 2.1% date from between 1975 and as far back as 1920. Here are some specific examples, using data from their paper and also from a recent paper by Peter Gerrand (2007).

The 2005 editions show 28.2 million first-language Spanish speakers in Spain, based on the 1986 census. As there was a census in 2001 in Spain, we might expect a considerable increase in both these totals. For Spain's regional languages, data on Catalan is from 1996, Basque from 1991, and Galician from 1986. English is no better treated. *Ethnologue* 2005 still gives totals for native English speakers from 1984 for the US and UK, 1987 for Australia and New Zealand, 1996 for South Africa, and 1998 for Canada. Its estimate of 11 million second-language English speakers in India is based on India's 1961 census! The real total is probably around 300 million. The dates tend not to be mentioned when these figures are mentioned on the Internet. People cite *Ethnologue* assuming that all the figures are equal. In fact they are highly asynchronous.

When it comes to the information about languages available on the Web, the situation is just as unsatisfactory. UNESCO has noticed the point. In January 2006, the Communications and Information Sector's *In Focus* web column asked the rhetorical question: 'Is it reasonable to define and direct linguistic policies in digital space without having sufficient, accurate, and precise indicators on the situation of languages and their progress?' It asked for an academic response. And in an important paper which has just appeared in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (2007), Peter Gerrand has provided one, identifying a methodology which would introduce a level of consistency into Web reports. In a letter to Riek Smeets in September 2007 he suggested 'that UNESCO co-ordinate the development of database of readily accessible, online statistics on use of the world's written languages on the Internet (i.e. their web presence), as well as reasonably up-to-date online statistics on the world's spoken language populations (i.e. user profiles).' This would be an admirable way of getting the world to remember the International Year of Languages 2008. The task is difficult, for other associated factors need to be addressed before we can achieve the desired level of consistency - such as better census data. Very few countries actually collect census data on the languages spoken within their territory. When they do, it is often not easy to find. And those that do do not ask the same questions. They vary in the attention they pay to speaking, listening, reading, writing, and signing. They vary in their reference to first and other languages. They vary in the way in which questions are

phrased, e.g. positively (which languages do you understand?) or negatively (which languages don't you understand?).

What I seem to have ended up with is a time-honoured approach - a five-point plan. We need Locations, Awards, Days, reliable Data, and Artworks. A LADDA, in short, towards which we can climb towards public recognition. We have one of the rungs in place and are moving towards a second. Might we have a third rung of the ladder in place by the end of 2008? Or even all five? I dream on.

Table 1 Prizes and awards related to topic areas, 2007

Advertising:	7
Agriculture:	2
Architecture:	5
Arts:	16
Astronomy:	8
Aviation and space technology:	15
Biological sciences:	15
Business and management:	8
Chemistry:	8
Comic books:	25
Computer science, engineering, technology, and invention:	29
Design:	9
Education:	2
Energy:	1
Entertainment:	4
Film:	22
Geography:	4
Geology:	19
History:	3
Humanitarianism:	32
Humanities:	6
Humour:	6
Internet:	3
Journalism:	36
Law:	2
Literature:	43
Logic and philosophy:	1
Mathematics:	36
Medical science:	8
Music:	26
Physics:	14
Politics:	2
Radio:	2
Science and Technology:	38
Social sciences:	3
Sport:	over 100
Stage:	5
Television:	16
Theology:	3
Tourism:	3

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_prizes%2C_medals%2C_and_awards

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